PEDAGOGY AND CULTURAL PRACTICE

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WRITING PERMITTED IN DESIGNATED AREAS ONLY

LINDA BRODKEY

PEDAGOGY AND CULTURAL PRACTICE
VOLUME 4

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

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Sections of "Poststructural Theories, Methods, and Practices" originally appeared as "Articulating Poststructural Theory in Research on Literacy" in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Literacy Research*, ed. Richard Beach, Judith L. Green, Michael L. Kamil, and Timothy Shanahan, 293-318, copyright 1992 the National Conference on Research in English and the National Council of Teachers of English, reprinted by permission; "Writing on the Bias" reprinted from *College English*, no. 56: 527-47, copyright 1994 the National Council of Teachers of English, by permission; "Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing" reprinted from *College English*, no. 49: 396-418, copyright 1986 the National Council of Teachers of English, by permission; "Tropics of Literacy" reprinted from *Journal of Education*, no. 168: 47-54, copyright 1986, by permission; "On the Subjects of Class and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters'" reprinted from *College English*, no. 51: 125-41, copyright 1989 the National Council of Teachers of English, by permission; "Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives" reprinted from *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, no. 18: 67-76, copyright 1987, by permission of the American Anthropological Association; "Presence of Mind in the Absence of Body" reprinted from *Journal of Education*, no. 170: 84-99, copyright 1988, by permission; "Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only" reprinted from *Higher Education under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities*, ed. Michael Berube and Cary Nelson, 214-37, copyright 1995 Routledge, by permission; "Telling Experiences" originally appeared as "Storytelling" in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin, 854-56, copyright 1995 Oxford University Press, Inc., reprinted by permission; "Transvaluing Difference" reprinted from *College English*, no. 51: 597-601, copyright 1989 the National Council of Teachers of English, by permission; "Writing about Difference: 'Hard Cases' for Cultural Studies" reprinted from *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom*, ed. James A. Berlin and Michael J. Vivion, 123-44, copyright 1992 Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, by permission; poem from "Prologue by Carl Sandburg" in *The Family of Man*, ed. Edward Steichen, Museum of Modern Art, 1955, by permission; excerpt from Susan Griffin "Three Poems for Women," in *Like the Iris of an Eye*, published by Harper & Row, 1976, copyright Susan Griffin, by permission; selections from Beverly Slapin, *The Magic Washing Machine: A Diary of Single Motherhood*, Ide House, Mesquite, Texas, 1983, by permission.

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290, Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brodkey, Linda.
Writing permitted in designated areas only / Linda Brodkey.
p. cm. — (Pedagogy and cultural practice ; v. 4)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8166-2806-8
ISBN 0-8166-2807-6 (pbk.)
1. Creative writing. 2. Creative writing—Study and teaching.
I. Title. II. Series.
PN181.B76 1996
808—dc20 95-44818

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For

Jesse

The Troubles at Texas

There are what I think of as *the troubles* at The University of Texas. In April of 1990 the English department policy committee I chaired voted to revamp the ailing composition course, known locally as English 306, by requiring the graduate students who staff the fifty-some sections of the one-semester first-year writing course to teach argumenation from a common syllabus, "Writing about Difference," for one year. From mid-May to mid-July 1990, I met with a number of graduate students and faculty members, known locally as the Ad Hoc Syllabus-Writing Group, to develop a syllabus (see "Writing about Difference: The Syllabus for English 306" in this volume). In late July 1990, a month before the start of the new school year, the dean of liberal arts sent the department a memorandum explaining that he had decided to postpone implementation of the syllabus for one year. That left us without a syllabus for a course that approximately three thousand students (about half of every entering class) are required to take and that the English department is required to staff and teach.

I began by saying there are troubles at Texas because, as far as I can tell, the decision to scuttle "Writing about Difference" had nothing whatever to do with the syllabus we wrote, for to my knowledge no one in central administration ever asked about it, much less read it, and no one outside the syllabus-writing group saw or asked to see it until after after the postponement. If the troubles cannot be traced to the syllabus, and I don't see how they possibly could be, I cannot but wonder whether there were extraordinary, perhaps even extracurricular, reasons for the dean's unexpected announcement and unprecedented decision. Yet in his memorandum to the department, the dean said only that he had decided to postpone what he mistakenly calls not the syllabus but "the new curriculum for English 306"—"because *we* need to address concerns and misunderstandings about the course, expressed within the university community and because *I* believe that additional time for planning and consultation will ensure the best course possible" (Meacham 1990, emphasis added). In his memo, the dean aligns himself with neither the administration nor those of us who developed the syllabus, but stands alone, thus disclaiming any responsibility *he* might have to defend the committee and the department from the "concerns and misunderstandings about the course, expressed within the university community." That ambiguous "we" condemned the dean, the chair, and me to a relentless and fruitless round of fall meetings —with department chairs, deans, and wealthy alumni and donors, many of whom seemed impressed by our plans; some of whom wished we would teach grammar,

spelling, and punctuation instead; some of whom seemed surprised and disappointed to learn that we never had taught literature in English 306 (and indeed could not without changing the catalog description); and none of whom seemed much interested in hearing about the syllabus.

It's not just that the dean is rhetorically naive, which I think may well be the case, for he seemed to believe that if I had persuaded him I could persuade everyone, including those who have other ideas about what ought to be taught in composition courses. It's that he seemed to be incredibly, even perversely, naive about his responsibility as dean, so naive that when he resigned without warning in January of 1991, leaving the department and the committee to fend for themselves, he still seemed not only bewildered by my failure to win universal support for "Writing about Difference" but also more interested in that unsurprising fact than in my insistence that his institutionally sanctioned postponement had effectively forced me and other members of the committee and department to lobby endlessly ("planning and consultation") what he so loosely identified as "the university community" (donors, deans, and department chairs) for the right to implement policies we were already authorized as a duly constituted departmental committee to make.

I can look back at the dean's memo and see in it a none too subtle piece of authoritarian politesse. Not to put too fine a point on it, the memo specifies the price of ransoming the syllabus. The syllabus held hostage by an unnamed group, in what the dean calls "the university community," would be released only in the unlikely event that its proponents could in an unspecified period of time with an unspecified amount of "planning and consultation" persuade opponents to cease publicizing their opposition in state and local newspapers, opposition that the dean euphemistically calls "concerns and misunderstandings expressed within the university community" in his memo. The sad fact is that the dean, who wrote and delivered the ransom note under the threat of continuing negative publicity, considered himself a proponent of the syllabus and in the same memo reassured the English department that not only would he "continue to support strongly . . . the concept of a writing and rhetoric class centered on the themes of diversity and difference," he also had the "assurance of the administration that they support this concept as well" (Meacham 1990).

By January the dean who had pledged strong support in July had resigned. And by January the administration—in the person of William Cunningham, the president of the university—had steadfastly refused repeated requests to meet with members of the policy committee or to permit us to field-test the syllabus in a few sections, while fecklessly linking our syllabus to what he pejoratively dismissed publicly as "multiculturalism." That President Cunningham refused even to meet with members of the policy committee while alluding to our work to parents and alumni and donors in phrases reminiscent of the sentiments, if not always the language, used in advertisements for the conservative National Association of Scholars strikes me as egregiously partisan political favoritism.

According to notes student reporter Jenny Huang made on a copy of the official transcript of President Cunningham's speech to parents in October 1990, he added this unscripted, seemingly impromptu remark immediately after mentioning that multiculturalism was "a topic of rising concern these days on campuses across the nation":

> Multiculturalism has become a code term for some people, signalling efforts to politicize the curriculum by promoting a particular ideology. We must not, and we will not permit such developments. (Cunningham 1990: 5)

It is a sentiment the president seemed to have liked so much that he expanded on it in a speech delivered a few months later to a group of donors:

> "Multiculturalism" is, as you know, a much-discussed topic on virtually every campus in the nation. You may have read something about the debate at the University. Unfortunately, "multiculturalism" has become a code word for some people, a signal of efforts—real or imagined—to use the curriculum to promote "politically correct" ideologies or viewpoints. We must not, and we will not, permit such a development at the University. (Cunningham 1991a: 8)

Apparently, it took until February of 1991 for the president to adopt the media-invented lexicon for his anxieties about multiculturalism, even though Richard Bernstein was warning readers of the *New York Times* as early as late October 1990 of "the rising hegemony of the politically correct" (Bernstein 1990). Perhaps the president learned his vocabulary lesson from reading the many subsequent editorials and feature articles on political correctness in *Newsweek, New York Magazine,* and the *New Republic.* Or, instead of reading the syllabus, perhaps he was reading the *Houston Chronicle,* which in early February announced the resignation of the entire policy committee under the "nonpartisan" five-column banner "Effort to Include Bias in UT Class Aborted," followed the next day by an "official" editorial titled "Good Riddance."

While the president's fears may have been consolidated by national media attention in the months following the postponement, he was repeatedly counseled against multiculturalism in the local press during the spring and summer of 1990. Weeks before the troubles over the syllabus for English 306 erupted, for instance, the *Texas Monthly* published Gregory Curtis's "Behind the Lines: The Bring-Something-Texan-That-You-Want-to-Burn Party," whose indictment of the dean of liberal arts and the chair of the English department for their commitment to multicultural education seems to rest on his conviction that "it is by now an unfortunate *fact* that substantial numbers of English professors think of themselves not as teaching lit-

erature but as teaching politics" (1990: 5, emphasis added). In light of that "fact," it is little wonder that many of the letters protesting our plans that were published in the student newspaper in June expressed suspicions about the politics of professors in the department. Nor, in the light of that "fact," is it surprising that Alan Gribben, the professor in the English department whose fears were published locally by the *Austin American-Statesman* ("Politicizing English 306") and nationally by the *New York Times* ("A Civil Rights Theme for a Writing Course") in late June, could simply assert with impunity that the course "has now fallen prey to the current mania for converting every academic subject into a politicized study of race, class and gender" and go on to say that the revision "has to be the most massive effort at thought-control ever attempted on the campus" (Gribben 1990b: 5).

Local frenzy over the syllabus seemed to come to a head three weeks later, however, when fifty-six faculty members from the university publicized their opposition in an advertisement in the student newspaper ("A Statement of Academic Concern"). The language in the local advertisement is reminiscent of that in a national advertisement that used to run regularly in the National Association of Scholars (NAS) journal, *Academic Questions*, and occasionally in campus newspapers and popular magazines ("Is the Curriculum Biased? A Statement of the National Association of Scholars"). There are alarming allegations in the text of "Is the Curriculum Biased?" foremost among them the association's unsupported claim that its "examination of many women's studies and minority studies programs discloses little study of other cultures and much excoriation of our society for its alleged oppression of women, blacks, and others," which "facts" lead the association to conclude that "the banner of 'cultural diversity' is apparently being raised by some whose paramount interest actually lies in attacking the West and its institutions."

As near as I can tell, the national association's advertisement is meant to articulate the heretofore unexpressed anxieties of members and would-be members (disaffected faculty members and administrators) and to urge them to keep these insidious intentions in mind when they are faced with curricular proposals on their respective campuses. The last—and italicized—paragraph mobilizes these anxieties as the warrant for going public:

> *We urge our colleagues to demand clear explanations and cogent arguments in support of the proposals being so rapidly brought before them, and to reject any that cannot be justified. The curriculum is and should be open to change, but we must rebut the false charges being made against existing disciplines. We must reject the allegations of "racism" and "sexism" that are frequently leveled against honest critics of the new proposals, and which only have the effect of stifling much needed debate.* ("Is the Curriculum Biased?")

Those friendly to the NAS are colleagues. Those whose ideas run counter to its

own are represented without benefit of personal pronouns altogether. They are instead a mere collection of passive-voice accusations: "false charges being made against existing disciplines" and "allegations of 'racism' and 'sexism' that are frequently leveled against honest critics." In the tradition of cold war think tanks, the association states the threats to Western civilization, which in turn warrant taking whatever measures members deem necessary to defend themselves, their disciplines, and the West against an amorphous enemy with ideas so unthinkable, it seems, that no existing personal pronouns in English can adequately articulate the distance "honest critics" must keep between themselves and the aliens—who are threatening to topple *their* institutions, *their* disciplines, *their* nation.

Plenty of my colleagues practice and teach what is being called traditional criticism. Some of them publish essays grounded in the principles of practical criticism. Some are indifferent to theory. Some are curious about it but not interested in reading it. And some are hostile to theory. But few of them could be fooled by such an ad, for only a handful are solipsistic enough to imagine that theorists are their enemies, or to believe that colleagues with whom they may disagree hope to destroy them, the literary canon, and literary criticism, much less the West and its institutions. I only wish I could believe that the president of the University of Texas were as well defended as most of my colleagues against the unsupported allegations and hyperboles in the NAS ad. That he has no recent practical experience of departmental life may explain, though it does not justify, his eagerness to ignore decisions voted on by the committee authorized to make and implement policy; to ignore departmental votes of confidence in the actions taken by that committee; to ignore requests to meet with the committee and requests to field-test materials developed for "Writing about Difference"; to ignore letters from other writing program directors, other academics, and concerned citizens; and to ignore the Modern Language Association statement questioning the distortions of the syllabus by its academic opponents (Frances Smith Foster 1991).

That President Cunningham is not a scholar but an administrator does not, however, justify his yielding to local or national special interest groups as ex cathedra arbiters of faculty decisions at the University of Texas. The president is fond of reminding those who inquire that not he but the dean postponed the syllabus. In a response sent to Ellen Pollak and all fifty-seven of her colleagues in English and American studies at Michigan State University who signed a letter arguing against the postponement, President Cunningham wrote:

> English 306 is a Freshman-level composition course, and its purpose is to serve the instructional needs of freshmen students in all of The University's colleges and schools. The course revisions proposed by several members of the English Department appeared to be quite controversial and were not embraced by large sections of the University

faculty. It is also important to point out that the decision not to implement the revised syllabus in the 1990-91 academic year was made by the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and announced in August of 1990 in order that campus debate could take place. (Cunningham 1991b)

While it is nominally true that the dean, not the president, sent the memo, the president is responsible for the actions deans take and is authorized to rescind those that are not in the best interests of the university. Perhaps the president would be willing, however, to take responsibility for the prose he has signed. In that one paragraph, he reduces a syllabus to "revisions proposed"; misrepresents a duly constituted departmental committee as "several" faculty members; aggrandizes the several faculty members who opposed the decision as "large sections of the University faculty"; and transmogrifies "planning and consultation" into "campus debate."

I find it difficult to imagine, moreover, what resolutions the campus would have debated. "Resolved: Extremism in the defense of academic privilege is no vice"? What would have been the point of these debates? To confirm that professors who know nothing about the theory, research, and practice of teaching composition are entitled to "their opinions"? To educate voters? Alumni? Donors? Students? To stage forensic spectacles, on the order of televised presidential debates, for the amusement of journalists? Politicians debate. Faculty argue—in committees and meetings and in their publications. I cannot imagine what the president of the University of Texas was thinking of when he singled out *one* of what must be dozens of duly constituted departmental policy committees to meet opponents in such a forum. I seriously doubt that he would have required the physics department to put off teaching chaos theory had some ill-informed folks objected to the word *chaos*. Instead of worrying about whether the campus had an opportunity to debate decisions made by one committee, the president ought to have been concerned that postponement abrogated the academic freedom along with the authority of the faculty members responsible for lower-division courses in the English department.

There is trouble at Texas. And trouble is not a problem. Problems are what the policy committee described and analyzed and resolved during the course of its deliberations about English 306. Problems are what members of the syllabus-writing group were locating and describing and analyzing and trying to solve during the two months we worked on the syllabus for "Writing about Difference." Paula Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism* was a problem for us; we couldn't figure out how to use enough of it to justify asking students to buy the book. We reasoned that we would have to drop either the book or the court opinions. We decided to drop the book because we believed the legal opinions to be more critical to learning how to analyze, evaluate, and write arguments. It was a hard decision to make. There are

quarters heard from in Rothenberg's reader that are not expressed in court opinions. And not using a reader meant locating appropriate readings for the court opinions and securing permission to use them in a multiple-section course, a loathsome task at any time, but particularly in the summer when academics are hard to reach. I was reluctant to use readings we had selected in lieu of ones that had been published by a press and hence undergone a cycle of review that at least said that someone other than Linda Brodkey thought them worth using in an undergraduate course. It was a problem that we had not yet located a full and accessible essay on role models, for instance, to accompany the decision in *Chambers v. Omaha Girls Club, Inc.* (The majority opinion and the dissenting opinion turn on the club's requirement that instructors be role models.)

We agonized over the number of writing and reading assignments, the kinds of assignments, the phrasing of them—whether to include a task analysis in all writing assignments or only in the long ones. The sequence of writing and reading assignments was a problem—as was the relationship between them—for we wanted students to examine the *structure* of the arguments they read and wrote, to identify the claims, grounds, and warrants used, and to evaluate them in light of the exigencies of antidiscrimination law and the contingencies of actual cases. Some opinions, such as the *Chambers* decision, argue that what is called a business necessity justifies discrimination. In other words, while the court agreed that the Omaha Girls Club had discriminated against Crystal Chambers, a single black woman, when they fired her because she was pregnant, it went on to argue that discrimination was justified in this instance because "the Girls Club established that it honestly believed that to permit single pregnant staff members to work with the girls would convey the impression that the Girls Club condoned pregnancy for the girls in the age group it serves" (*Chambers* 1987: 701-2). We wanted as many so-called hard cases as we could find because we wanted students to learn for themselves to mediate the exigencies of rules and the contingencies of circumstances in their writing (see "Writing about Difference: 'Hard Cases' for Cultural Studies" in this volume).

On the very day that the dean was meeting with the president and provost about postponing the syllabus, graduate students and faculty members were at a workshop on the problem of making tokens of the few students of color enrolled in writing classes by expecting them to represent an entire race or ethnic group. How to teach teachers not to make tokens of students was a problem. How to teach every student to judge each case on its merits *as an argument* was a problem. How to teach argumentation as largely a matter of exploration rather than demonstration was a problem. How to teach, not preach, difference was a problem. Problems can be stated, discussed, and solved, if only provisionally, to the satisfaction of those working on them. There is information to be taken into account, goals to be stated and restated, and ample occasion for criticism and persuasion. All of which is to say

that most of us believe problems can be solved because we believe solutions to be largely a matter of clearly stating a goal or a set of goals, identifying problems, and then laying out and "testing" possible solutions. And all of this means that we believe in argumentation itself.

We haven't had any problems at Texas since the dean solved *his* problem by "postponing" our decision to implement the common syllabus and instantaneously and irrevocably transformed our problems into what the Irish call the troubles. Unlike problems, the troubles are not solved by talking things over or sitting down at bargaining tables. Compromises are unthinkable because opponents see their interests as mutually exclusive. The troubles seem only to be exacerbated by the pretense that they can be resolved rationally, as many of us who attended the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) session "Freshman English and Social Issues: The Debate at Texas" saw for ourselves in March 1991 when Maxine Hairston, John Ruszkiewicz, James Kinneavy, and John Slatin debated the syllabus. They spoke in anger, pain, fear, and sorrow, and in those idioms also spoke of their desire to restore reason to their respective worlds. Collateral damage is to be expected, of course, when people who see their day-to-day intellectual problems as troubles abandon the civil pretense, perhaps, but a civil contract nonetheless, that their disagreements can be amicably resolved. The troubles are the insurmountable problems that result when local problems are appropriated by a group that is not interested in resolving local problems but is interested, instead, in exploiting local problems for its own purposes. Cynical escalation of local problems into troubles is one of the strategies routinely employed by colonizers, who need to obscure self-interested actions that would otherwise be immediately recognized as the unwarrantable denial of human rights they are. No matter the venue, the consequences to all who are colonized, including the collaborators, are devastating.

At the moment, however, I am more interested in the strategic practices of the colonizers, specifically in the representation of the group to be colonized as incapable of self-governance. Grounds for colonizing the English department are spelled out to the locals by Gregory Curtis in the *Texas Monthly:* "For about the last five years, the English department at UT has been, as a professor might say, rent in two" (1990: 5). There are the "generally older and more established professors who believe in traditional literature and traditional teaching" and the "younger professors who see literature as a 'tool of opposition,' as a typical phrase goes, and teaching as a way of proselytizing for their gender, their race, or their radical—most often specifically Marxist—political beliefs" (1990: 5). In stark cold war terms: the enemy is within. The gentleman scholars in the department are beset not by radical students (as in the 1960s) but by radical colleagues "who have nothing but contempt for the society they are supposed to help educate and hatred for the state that pays their salaries" (1990: 5).

The president of the University of Texas effectively underwrote the warrant for colonization by not publicly defending faculty members against this or subsequent representations of disagreements about policy in the department as insurmountable troubles. His silence in the face of repeated assaults on faculty integrity, more than anything that was printed, gave credence to the take-it-to-the-public strategy practiced by opponents of the syllabus. It is arguably his presidential silence, for instance, that is responsible for the report in the fall 1990 National Association of Scholars *Newsletter* that praised the leadership and members of the Texas chapter of the NAS for going public with their complaints. In addition to singling out Alan Gribben and his allies for praise, the *Newsletter* mentions that the postponement followed " 'A Statement of Academic Concern,' signed by fifty-six faculty members—including seventeen NAS/TAS [Texas Association of Scholars] members—[which] appeared in the *Daily Texan* [the campus paper] urging that the course be withdrawn" ("NAS Impact, Texas": 5). From where I stand, the NAS credits it members with a victory that was technically a no-show. The advertisement appeared in the student newspaper on July 18, 1990, and on July 23, 1990, the dean announced that he was postponing the syllabus for a year. In the five-day interim, the president and the provost of the university met privately with the dean and the department chair.

For the record, the NAS *Newsletter* fails to mention that some of the fifty-six faculty members (there are more than twenty-two hundred on the Austin campus) who signed "A Statement of Academic Concern" later claimed not to know that the advertisement was paid for with a check drawn on the Texas affiliate's account (see Henson and Philpott 1990a and 1990b). Nor does the newsletter mention the letter Professor Gribben wrote to a wealthy donor in which he spells out his three-stage plan for salvaging the department along with his career, which plan resembles one he published a year earlier in *Academic Questions* for salvaging what remains of English departments. The Gribben Plan for Texas is as follows: (1) "the English department should be placed in receivership indefinitely . . . and then governed by a new English chairman appointed directly by the . . . Provost"; (2) "the department's faculty should be divided into a Department of Critical Theory and Cultural Studies and a Department of English Literature and Language"; and (3) "barring the accomplishment of these steps, the two university-wide required English courses (E 306 and E 316K) should be abolished, thus ending the necessity of hiring additional English professors at the rate they have been recruited for the past decade from the most radicalized (but prestigious graduate programs across the nations [*sic*])" (Gribben 1990a).

There is trouble at Texas. Whenever an administration gratuitously contravenes departmental decisions, it colonizes a department's intellectual life along with its administrative autonomy. I used to consider English department meetings to be the best evidence that we had entered a period of self-censorship. For there are

obvious differences between the department meetings held in the spring before and the fall after the postponement. In the spring meeting, while three faculty members argued vociferously against the committee's decision to implement a common syllabus and to adopt the Rothenberg reader, they argued against the decisions without accusing the committee of bad faith. Discussion among the more than one hundred faculty members and graduate students who attended the meeting covered a broad terrain of concerns ranging from possible readings to requests for clarification, from practical problems about the difficulty of reading court opinions to the intellectual possibilities of teaching arguments by working in one of the few remaining venues where arguments have consequences. By the end of the discussion, some faculty members were even excited enough by the plan to teach writing from court opinions on discrimination suits that some 10 percent volunteered to teach a section, even though the policy did not apply to faculty members, and even though volunteering also meant attending a presemester orientation to the course and meeting regularly during the semester with a group of graduate teachers, who would also be teaching the syllabus. This was a happy turn of events for the composition program, since the department had voted as recently as 1985 to require but not teach the very course some faculty were now volunteering to teach. That vote only makes sense if you read it as a claim that composition is by definition remedial and hence should not be taught at the University of Texas.

No such intellectual enthusiasm for writing pedagogy was expressed by any faculty member or graduate student, however, in the September meeting following the postponement. The other members of the policy committee and I sought and won a vote of confidence for the committee. We neither sought nor desired a vote on the syllabus itself, since the committee was fully authorized, as were all the previous ones for at least the past twenty-five years, to do precisely what we had done. Questions were few and answers short in a meeting dominated by Robert's Rules of Order. I doubt that anyone in the room believed we were talking about a syllabus, writing, or anything other than political solidarity in the face of unwarranted administrative intervention. In a secret ballot taken at the meeting, the department affirmed its confidence in the committee by a vote of forty-six to eleven, with three abstentions, and shortly thereafter the Associated Graduate Students of English followed suit in a mail ballot, fifty-two to two, no abstentions. These are votes expressing commitment to academic freedom, which includes the right of faculty to develop a syllabus to meet curricular goals, and these are votes, needless to say, that the president ignored whenever he gave speeches to donors or responded to faculty from other institutions.

The troubles have made a mockery of public meetings at Texas. At a department meeting in the spring of 1991, for instance, all thirty-six faculty members present voted unanimously—with virtually no discussion—for an English 306 syllabus designed by the committee chaired by James Kinneavy. No one voted against it, no

one abstained, and no one volunteered to teach it. That is not to say there was anything wrong with the syllabus, but that the syllabus was not the issue. The issue was that a department committee believed it needed to protect its members and its work from an onslaught of negative publicity. Events justify the committee's seeking departmental backing for the course. But bear in mind that these events, which led to and followed on the postponement, and which in their turn created such remarkable political solidarity within the department, have silenced all but the political register of public speech. We registered our political solidarity and political dissent, but the politics of publicity and postponement effectively colonized the intellectual life along with the administrative autonomy of the department.

I have reached the point in the narrative when any reasonably experienced storyteller would insert an epilogue or coda. In fact, while I knew I could not match "Reader, I married him," I had hoped the Kinneavy syllabus would be the denouement. But it seems the vote resolved nothing more than an installment in an ongoing saga, which may turn out to be as long as Texas is large. In June of 1991, the acting dean posted what I think of as the first call for rehearsals for *306, The Sequel*. In a letter to the chair, Dean Robert King (whose surname is itself proof, I suppose, that we are not dealing with literary realism here) announced that he was returning the department to a form of governance known as a Budget Council, which "will by definition consist of all and only the Full Professors in the Department" (King 1991). Dean King's decision is based, he goes on to say, on the fact that "twice during my earlier deanship I suspended hiring through lack of confidence in the recommendations being made by the small number of faculty serving at any one time on the Executive Committee" (King 1991). He does not mention that most members of the Executive Committee were elected by the entire faculty, or that it included elected representives from all ranks, or that the chair could appoint two more members, say, women or minority representatives if none were elected from their meager number in the department. Nor does Dean King mention that when he suspended hiring two years ago, he wrote the chair that his decision was based on "complaints from a number of your colleagues . . . in the Department of English about a lack of balance in hiring new faculty" and "talk of 'polarization'; ideological and political considerations—non-academic considerations," which "were said to play an increasing and unacceptable role in the recruitment of new faculty" (King 1989). Nor does Dean King mention that he seems to be following the Gribben plan for salvaging the English department. [In 1992, the year after I left Texas and the year before he retired, Dean King removed the Rhetoric and Composition program from the English department.]

Since I cannot provide a coda, the least I can do is leave you the cold comfort of this anecdote recounted by Patricia Williams in her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. She says that many law students find this and others of her stories confusing. I do not. And I trust you will not.

Walking down Fifth Avenue in New York not long ago, I came up behind a couple and their young son. The child, about four or five years old, had evidently been complaining about big dogs. The mother was saying, "But why are you afraid of big dogs?" "Because they're big," he responded with eminent good sense. "But what's the difference between a big dog and a little dog?" the father persisted. "They're *big*," said the child. "But there's really no difference," said the mother, pointing to a large slathering wolfhound with narrow eyes and the calculated amble of a gangster, and then to a beribboned Pekinese the size of a roller skate, who was flouncing along just ahead of us all, in that little fox-trotty step that keeps Pekinese from ever being taken seriously. "See?" said the father. "If you look really closely you'll see there's no difference at all. They're all just dogs."

And I thought: Talk about your iron-clad canon. Talk about a static, unyielding, totally uncompromising point of reference. These people must be lawyers. . . . How else do people learn to capitulate so uncritically to a norm that refuses to allow for difference? How else do grown-ups sink so deeply into the authoritarianism of their own world view that they can universalize their relative bigness so completely that they obliterate the subject position of their child's relative smallness? (To say nothing of the position of the slathering wolfhound, from whose own narrow perspective I dare say the little boy must have looked exactly like a lamb chop.) (1991: 12-13)

I'm with that little boy. And from where we stand, differences matter.

—Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July 1991