

(*Signs* 19 [1994]: 591–629), an essay valuable for its sensitivity, insight, and ambivalence regarding the leap by many nonblack male critics into the field of African American women's fiction. DuCille writes:

[T]he celebration of African-American women's literature and history as the discursively familiar, as a "truth" to which black women scholars have privileged access rooted in common experience, both delimits and demeans those discourses. . . . It restricts this work to a narrow orbit in which it can be readily validated only by those black and female for whom it reproduces what they already know. (602)

At the same time, duCille emphatically defends the study of African American women's fiction as a rigorous academic discipline, and she condemns scholars who barge into the field without knowledge of its history and parameters. The real questions, she writes, should not be about "territoriality and essentialism" but about "professionalism and disciplinarity" (603).

I agree with duCille's position and would only add that African American women writers are also American writers. Toni Morrison's work addresses all Americans (albeit different groups in different ways). It draws on African American and European American traditions and contributes to American literature, however we construe that mixed and unshapable entity, as well as to African American literature. In literature as in history, we're all in the same leaky boat. And novels like *Beloved* reveal most clearly how, as Cathy Caruth has written, "history is the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."

JAMES BERGER
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The Job Crisis

To the Editor:

In the 1995 Presidential Address, Sander Gilman proposes an organized national program of postdoctoral teaching fellowships ("*Habent Sua Fata Libelli*; or, Books, Jobs, and the MLA," 111 [1996]: 390–94). I believe Gilman's idea of a clearinghouse for "mentored" postdoctoral fellows to be ill-considered and dangerous. One might have titled his address "How to End Tenure," because that is the result it would help to produce. Any number of administrators would love to turn a significant amount of their lower-level undergraduate courses over to postdocs costing fifty to sixty percent as much as faculty members. Gilman even throws in the added plus of "limited benefit packages" (393). We all know what that

means: no health care for the kids, no vesting in a retirement program. Moreover, not paying tuition waivers does not even save money ordinarily, since tuition waivers for graduate students do not generally involve any transfer of funds. And it is hardly likely that tuition-paying graduate students will materialize.

Gilman proudly announces that this plan would emulate how things work in the sciences. Did the man talk to any scientists about their own employment crisis and how their long tradition of postdocs is playing into the depressed job market? I have. The science postdoc that used to lead to a tenure-track job is now becoming an end in itself, producing a permanent caste of second-class scientists who take postdoc after postdoc in search of a faculty position that never materializes. Meanwhile, their benefits are indeed limited, their prospects, retirement plans, and job security nonexistent.

I am all in favor of postdocs if they are created as temporary measures under specific and limited conditions. My department now offers three-year postdocs to its new PhDs. They have worked well for the participants who used the time to improve their marketability; some have ended up with tenure-track jobs who might otherwise have washed out of the profession.

I am also in favor of postdoc exchanges, since they would give people teaching experience in different settings. But there are dangers to such programs that must be mitigated by strict guidelines: first, no department without a PhD program should be permitted to participate in a postdoctoral consortium or exchange program; second, no department should be allowed into a consortium unless it can prove that it has reduced the size of its doctoral program over the last twenty years. The point of the second stipulation is that funds to employ postdocs must come from vacated teaching assistantships, not from decommissioned faculty lines. Liberal arts colleges and universities without doctoral programs in the relevant area would be barred from participation.

Even with these safeguards, a formal, well-publicized interinstitutional postdoc program would encourage many schools to shift a portion of their personnel budget from tenure-track faculty lines to postdocs. This would accelerate existing trends in higher education—away from permanent, full-time tenured faculty members and toward adjuncts, part-timers, and now postdocs. The latter group has little control over a school's policies and curriculum, fewer free-speech guarantees, less support for research and independent intellectual inquiry, and a good deal less job satisfaction. Gilman may be gleeful at the prospects, but someone who read his address before publication ought to have urged him to think through the implications of his plan more carefully.

I cannot help feeling that Gilman's "mentoring" suggestion is primarily a symbolic way to infantilize postdoctoral fellows, making it seem appropriate for them to be paid less and receive fewer benefits. Many of the postdocs I know—with teaching experience in twenty to thirty courses, sometimes at two or more schools, and with books or articles to their credit—do not need mentoring; they need a job. Postdocs, receiving ten or twenty thousand dollars less than their identically qualified classmates who happened to get jobs, are not always the happiest employees. Indeed, the postdocs who never get permanent jobs may end up spending ten or twelve or more years at the same level before an abrupt and premature career termination that may leave them even more wounded and rudderless than new PhDs who fail to find employment. Such human consequences merit more reflection than Gilman's proposal appears to manifest.

To raise these necessary issues is not to betray the profession or the MLA but to seek to reform them. The job crisis has lasted for a quarter century; throughout that time the MLA has been part of the problem, not part of the solution. It has concentrated on offering publication and speaking opportunities to its members, ignoring the deepening funding crisis in higher education. Its main response to joblessness has been to deny its existence or to collect statistics in such a way as to minimize the problem and put the profession in the best possible light. I believe that record is a good deal less than honorable or exemplary. But if I were "disaffected," as Sandra Gilbert, in the *MLA Newsletter*, has claimed I am, I would not be writing this letter.

CARY NELSON
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To the Editor:

Pleased though I was to see that Sander L. Gilman used his Presidential Address to discuss the problems of the proliferating tribe of underemployed PhDs, I was distressed to see that his solution comes down to advocating still more underemployment. A two-year teaching postdoc does not solve the problems of the individual job seeker but only delays for a couple years the inevitable decision whether to keep searching or to give up. For the pool of job seekers as a whole, his plan would exacerbate the problem, creating an ever-growing backlog of job applicants, further cutting the chances of any seeker to land a job, and thus creating an ever-greater need for the stopgaps Gilman advocates. From my experience in temporary appointments, I can testify to the demoralizing effect of finding oneself in a position where achievements

we are taught to value as professionals—the appreciation of one's students, the respect of one's colleagues, and the publication of one's scholarship—count for nothing. Gilman actually encourages the practice, already in force in many places, of two-tier hiring, where these achievements are for some hires rewarded with tenure, promotion, and raises while for others the same accomplishments earn no material professional reward. Gilman notes that an institution could turn two graduate assistantships into one teaching postdoc; however, it would be much more useful to the career aspirations of graduate students to consolidate the money from a few assistantships into the salary for one new assistant professor.

JAMES D. SULLIVAN
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Reply:

I am pleased by the prompt and insightful comments of Cary Nelson and James D. Sullivan. My proposal for postdoctoral fellowships is only one response to the job situation. Many more proposals have been and need to be made. I am aware of the difficulties and perils of the postdoctoral mentored-teaching proposal, but I believe that it can be done now with the resources the academy already possesses.

As professor of psychiatry for fifteen years at the Cornell Medical College and for the past two years at the Pritzker Medical School, I know that everything is not rosy for graduate and professional students outside the humanities. Traditionally, however, the postdoctoral structures in the sciences have not resulted in the reduction of academic positions and have permitted graduate students a productive period of research before going on the job market.

My proposal is but a quick response to the immediate situation. Our debates must not stop us from pursuing as many different approaches as possible to providing jobs now. Let us work together to accomplish our goal of creating more positions in more institutions for younger humanists. My fear is that debate will take the place of action. The end result of inaction will be the loss of first-rate younger professors from the academy.

These debates should not bog down into name-calling. I have been horrified by the sight of academics attacking one another in a tone that can only give aid and comfort to the enemies of higher education, who quote us as proof of the bankruptcy of the system.

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