

graduate students should be encouraged to pursue studies in African American literature and that universities should hire such students on completion of their degrees) and her third main point (that we need to be on the lookout for white interlopers in the field). The question that McKay fails to address adequately is how we can tell the white interlopers from the white noninterlopers. Who is to judge? What are the criteria, given that “time, energy, and commitment” are hard to quantify (367)? Perhaps universities are reluctant to hire a white to teach African American literature not just because they are hoping to hire a black but because they are afraid of hiring an interloper.

I write all this as a white scholar whose area of specialization is, in part, African American literature. I have been through the job interviews McKay alludes to where the only real question was the color of my skin; I have seen ads for positions I could fill return to the job lists year after year. Although no one in my graduate department cautioned me against working in African American literature, the job search process proved to me that it was not the most practical line of study I could have undertaken. The end result of my job search was that I found myself in the ironic position of being a white professor teaching African American literature (among other things) to a student body made up almost entirely of African Americans. I have spent the last six years at Fisk University, one of the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that McKay leaves out of her discussion completely, other than to note that in the late 1960s white institutions took their brightest stars. In the current market as well, HBCUs have been particularly and adversely affected by the demand for black PhDs, whom these schools cannot hope to lure away from Ivy League universities and other elite institutions. HBCUs have been willing to hire white faculty members to teach African American literature largely because the other option, to leave it untaught, is not possible, given the schools’ mission and student bodies. I feel that in my six years at Fisk I have proved myself a legitimate scholar in African American literature, but, believe me, I felt like an interloper for several years, even though I was academically trained in the discipline. I still get into arguments with students who would take great exception to McKay’s statement that “[t]o learn [African American literature] is to ‘know’ it, and only those willing to learn will know” (366); these students would say that I may have “learned” African American literature but I don’t “know” it and never can because I am not black.

Reading McKay’s column left me with the uncomfortable feeling of being on the hot seat again, much as Phillis Wheatley must have felt facing her judges. McKay makes me question anew my status as a noninterloper. In

the final analysis, what she seems to be implying, or at least what I infer from her argument, is that the only people who can confirm whether a white scholar is a true patriot or an interloper are African Americans. Instead of eliminating the Wheatley court, then, McKay’s discussion leads her to reinscribe it in opposite terms: white scholars now have to be judged by their black superiors.

I don’t believe that this was the message McKay intended to deliver in her piece, but she should be made aware of how her comments could be interpreted.

ADAM MEYER  
*Fisk University*

To the Editor:

As a white male professor of American and British literature who has taught African American literature intermittently in a small midwestern department of English since fall 1970, I agree generally with Nellie McKay, especially with her point that “[t]raining and learning” must be provided to scholars in order that anyone, regardless of ethnicity, can pursue the study of African American literature appropriately (366). However, I think she uses the term “Wheatley court” ill-advisedly.

McKay refers continually to the Wheatley court as that which must be “abolish[ed]” or “disbanded” before “a black pipeline of eager young scholars will flow as it should, and the walls of African American scholarly resentment toward white academic interlopers and of the fears of those guarding white, black, and all other intellectual territories inside our common property will come tumbling down around us. Then we will all be free to claim our full American literary heritage” (368, 364, 368). I believe she is correct in arguing that better-prepared scholars of African American literary works are needed, but I think that biased or uninformed critics, literary reviewers, and members of the public, not the judges of a Wheatley court, have been discouraging objective appraisal of African American literary efforts.

After all, as McKay reports, the Wheatley court declared in writing that “the works [were Wheatley’s] and, by extension, eligible for publication under her name.” Before this so-called court, says McKay, “[i]n a stunning repudiation of the white supremacy espoused by such Enlightenment luminaries as Immanuel Kant and David Hume, the Senegalese slave girl proved the skeptics wrong” (360). To my knowledge, we have not convened such a court today, but we still have biased readers and scholars in need of appropriate training and learning.

Further, when McKay writes that her “generation (the black studies generation) of African American specialists”

had “several excellent anthologies, comprehensive and specialized, that introduced us to much of the material then known to only a few people” (367), she omits what I consider three important collections available before the Barksdale and Kinnamon anthology (1972): *From the Roots: Short Stories by Black Americans* (1970), edited by Clarence James; *Black American Literature: Poetry* (1969), edited by Darwin Turner; and *The New Black Poetry* (1969), edited by Clarence Major. In particular, James’s anthology was my most important resource as I attempted to offer African American literature to my students in fall 1970. It provides not only important selections of fiction from 1889 to 1969 but also invaluable historical information in charts at the ends of the five sections in the book. To not mention James’s early contribution to the field and to use the term “Wheatley court” inappropriately may be simple slips in research and writing, but a splendid scholar such as McKay nonetheless should have avoided them.

Finally, I applaud Nellie McKay’s collaboration with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others in the editing of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1996). The work has been needed for years and should prove a valuable cornerstone in the foundation of future African American studies programs.

CARL A. ADKINS  
Buena Vista University

To the Editor:

Nellie McKay is absolutely right that the profession should have decisively addressed the challenge of increasing minority enrollment in PhD programs thirty years ago. Had we done so, we would now have a strong cultural tradition to sustain us through the long-term employment crisis in higher education. Unfortunately, the problem will now be much harder to solve, and we will not be successful if we altogether separate the genuine need to encourage minority enrollment from all the economic and social forces working to discourage it.

Several trends may dissuade African American undergraduates from pursuing humanities PhDs: (1) the massive shift from full-time to part-time faculty employment; (2) substantial recent increases in the typical level of graduate student debt; (3) the emergence of a new class of full-time, tenure-track faculty positions at annual salaries of \$25,000 or less; (4) continuing conservative attacks on multiculturalism, on the expanded canon, and on efforts to increase recognition of the historical role of racism in American culture. These forces are combining to degrade the cultural capital, social mobility, and financial rewards associated with college teaching. They are

making teaching English or foreign languages much less attractive career options. Moreover, their combined effect is still worse. High debt and a low salary work together to encourage students to pursue other careers.

Most of the emerging economic forces will also be negative. The explosive growth in distance learning, for example, is exaggerating the shift toward part-time employment. We will not bring more minority students into a profession losing its dignity. The completed work of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment and the ongoing effort of the association’s Graduate Student Caucus to turn the profession’s primary attention toward its complex and massively unfair job system are essential to any effort to achieve McKay’s commendable goals.

CARY NELSON  
University of Illinois, Urbana

### Lacanian Tragedy and the Ethics of *Jouissance*

To the Editor:

In “Lacan and the New Lacanians: Josephine Hart’s *Damage*, Lacanian Tragedy, and the Ethics of *Jouissance*” (113 [1998]: 395–407), James M. Mellard refers to a “paradoxical, perhaps perverse, twist Lacan gives to ethics and traditional tragedy” (395). More specifically locating this idea, Mellard asserts, “In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan insists that the true ethical position is not that which abides by the desire of the law of one’s culture but that which accords with [and a lot depends on what Mellard means by “accords with”] *jouissance*, with the drive of the other within oneself” (406). But while a shift “from an ethics of desire to one of *jouissance*” may have taken place in history (396), such a shift is not at all evident in Lacan’s *Ethics* seminar, where *jouissance* is by no means privileged over desire.

Mellard’s *PMLA* article drastically simplifies and misrepresents the intricate complexity of Lacan’s argument about the ethics of psychoanalysis. I question Mellard’s damaging idea that the ethics of psychoanalysis is illustrated by a character who causes various forms of horror by superimposing his own death-driven *jouissance* on that of a femme fatale. (Mellard refers to a “horrifying element” in Stephen Fleming’s “drive,” “the horror of this *jouissance*,” “the obscenity of his demand,” and the “obscene kernel of [his] enjoyment” [406].) An underlying concern of this letter is what sort of value psychoanalysis could possibly have in the practical arenas of the clinic and social change were its ethics to be conflated with the death drive.