Mary Louise Pratt

Humanities for the Future: Reflections on the Western Culture Debate at Stanford

SWM, 38, 5' 10", N/S, Stanford scientist, average-looking, a bit eccentric, blindingly brilliant, phenomenally funny, amazingly humble, likes jogging, bicycling, all things done with racquet-like instruments, movies, literature and most aspects of western civilization, but most interested in a reasonably attractive and intelligent 25-45 PA female capable of being interested in me. Send photo & brief description of your life, liberty and pursuits of happiness. Box 65C.

This singles ad appeared late last summer in the personals column of a local weekly serving the communities of Palo Alto, California, and neighboring Stanford University. Apart from its intriguing characterization of the "Stanford scientist," I quote it here to suggest the extent to which Stanford's long and intense debate over its Western culture curriculum last year permeated local life. In the semiotics of representation and identity, "Western civilization" remains a constant and intensely meaningful point of reference.

The South Atlantic Quarterly 89:1, Winter 1990.
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CCC 0038-2876/90/$1.50.
The debate which took place at Stanford during the winter of 1988 and the resulting reform of the Western culture requirement received a great deal of national attention, largely due to the involvement of then Secretary of Education William Bennett, who chose to use the Stanford case as a platform to advocate his views, quite literally making a federal case out of it. Perhaps because of Bennett’s own partisanship, the account of the Stanford debate in the national press had a shape somewhat different from the local experience. As other institutions face similar struggles, fuller accounts of the workings of change at Stanford may be helpful. At the same time, there is an urgent need to formulate the concerns that so unexpectedly made freshman book lists an object of wide public concern. What nerves had been touched?

Histories of Western culture curricula in the United States point to the Western civilization course instituted at Columbia University in 1919 as a main antecedent for such courses all over the country. One recent account, however, notes that the Columbia course had a direct antecedent of its own, a War Issues course instituted in 1918 at various universities, including Columbia. Its aim was “to educate recently conscripted American soldiers about to fight in France . . . to introduce [them] to the European heritage in whose defense they were soon to risk their lives.” A new tie to Europe was constituted in relation to a national imperative.

Current struggles over Western culture curricula—both challenges to them and reactionary attempts to reassert them—also emerge from urgently felt national imperatives. Among these is an imperative to reimagine cultural and civic identity in the United States in the wake of vast changes produced by the decline of its global hegemony, the rapid internationalization of capital and industry, the immigrant implosion of the “third world” onto the “first,” and the democratization of American institutions and political processes that occurred in the two decades prior to 1980. The question can be posed in Pierre Bourdieu’s sometimes helpful language: What is to count as “cultural capital” in a culturally plural nation and a globalized human world? How will that capital be constructed and deployed, how will people be asked to identify with it? How might the United States project itself into the future as a cultural and political entity? In the words (a few of which I’ve emphasized) of one speaker in the Stanford debate:

The character of U.S. society is changing. More and more North Americans insist on affirming the specificity of their class, ethnicity, gender, region, race, or sexual orientation, rather than melting into the homogenizing pot. They see such affirmations as intrinsic to their citizenship. Culture, literature, and the academy have been important sites for these affirmations: it will be neither productive nor comfortable to commit ourselves only to resisting these developments, rather than engaging with them.

Having acquiesced to change, by what visions will United Statesians be guided into a future where they and their society will be different from what they are now? What is the United States trying to become? What are the options?

The world is full of multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual nations, so there are plenty of models around. Indeed, Bloom, Bennett, Bellow, and the rest (known by now in some quarters as the Killer B’s) are advocating one of them: to create a narrowly specific cultural capital that will be the normative referent for everyone, but will remain the property of a small and powerful caste that is linguistically and ethnically unified. It is this caste that is referred to by the “we” in Saul Bellow’s astoundingly racist remark that “when the Zulus have a Tolstoy, we will read him.” Few doubt that behind the Bennett-Bloom program is a desire to close not the American mind, but the American university, to all but a narrow and highly uniform elite with no commitment to either multiculturalism or educational democracy. Thus while the Killer B’s (plus a C—Lynne Cheney, the Bennett mouthpiece now heading the National Endowment for the Humanities) depict themselves as returning to the orthologies of yesteryear, their project must not be reduced to nostalgia or conservatism. Neither of these explain the blanket contempt they express for the country’s universities. They are fueled not by reverence for the past, but by an aggressive desire to lay hold of the present and future. The B’s act as they do not because they are unaware of the cultural and demographic diversification underway in the country; they
are utterly aware. That is what they are trying to shape; that is why they are seeking, and using, national offices and founding national foundations.

Many citizens are attracted to Bloom’s and Bennett’s pronouncements, on the other hand, out of fairly unreflected attachments to the past (including their own college experience), and simply have trouble seeing how good books could possibly do any harm. Many people are perfectly ready for change but remain deeply anxious about where it is all supposed to be heading. Other visions of the cultural and educational future in the United States, then, are likely to generate as much interest as the Killer B’s’, if they can be effectively introduced into the national discussion. The attention drawn by Bloom’s intellectually deplorable Closing of the American Mind and Bennett’s intellectually more deplorable “To Reclaim a Legacy” most directly reflects not levels of enthusiasm for their programs (though much enthusiasm does exist), but levels of anxiety that have developed around the issue of national cultural identity. Even among the many people ready for change, one seems to hear voices asking, “If I give up white supremacy, who am I? Am I still American? Am I still white? If I give up homophobia, who am I? Am I the same as gay? If I give up misogyny, am I still a man? a woman? an American? If I learn Spanish, does it make me Mexican? What ties me to these gays, these feminists, these Salvadorans, these Vietnamese, these Navaho, these white people?” And perhaps more acutely, “What ties them to me?” The sooner answers to these questions are attempted, the better. What, indeed, would it mean to adopt the “non-hierarchical, intercultural perspective on the study of culture and the West” called for by one Stanford humanist (a classicist, at that)? What can cultural citizenship and identity be in a radically plural society enmeshed in relentlessly globalizing relations? Can there be transnational national culture? Can it be good?

Alongside the understandable apprehensions such questions generate (especially late in a century), it should be possible to create some excitement and curiosity. After all, this could become, perhaps has become, a fabulously energetic and revealing cultural experiment. It has tremendous imaginative appeal. Does the United States not badly need to revitalize its image and understanding of itself? Is there not much to be learned about the fluid global cultureways that bring the music of Soweto into living rooms across the United States, and make The Cosby Show the most popular TV program in South Africa? Is there not much to be learned about the past by rereading it in the light of contemporary intercultural understanding?

Stanford adopted its first Western civilization course in 1935, and, like many other universities, abolished it around 1970. Efforts to restore a requirement began around 1975 on the part of a group of senior faculty in literature, classics, and history. By 1978 a two year pilot program had been approved and in 1980 a new year-long required course began for all incoming students. It consisted of several tracks corresponding roughly to different departments and schools, and sharing a core reading list that became the focus of the controversy. It is interesting to note that the notorious reading list was not part of the original proposal for the requirement. The list evolved during the pilot program out of desire to guarantee a “common intellectual experience,” a phrase that acquired great importance in the subsequent debate without acquiring any greater specificity of meaning. Here is the much-discussed list:

**ANCIENT WORLD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required:</th>
<th>Strongly recommended:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hebrew Bible, Genesis</td>
<td>Thucydides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plato, Republic, major portions of books 1-7</td>
<td>Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer, major selections from Iliad, Odyssey, or both</td>
<td>Cicero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one Greek tragedy</td>
<td>Virgil, Aeneid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Testament, selections including a gospel</td>
<td>Tacitus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE
Required:
Augustine, Confessions, 1-9
Dante, Inferno
More, Utopia
Machiavelli, The Prince
Luther, Christian Liberty
Galileo, The Starry Messenger, The Assayer

Strongly recommended:
Boethius, Consolation of Philosophy
Aquinas, some selection which illustrates the structure of a Thomistic question
A Shakespearean tragedy
Cervantes, Don Quixote
Descartes, Discourse on Method, Meditations
Hobbes, Leviathan
Locke, Second Treatise of Civil Government

MODERN
Required:
Voltaire, Candide
Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto
Freud, Outline of Psychoanalysis, Civilization and Its Discontents
Darwin, Selections

Strongly recommended:
Rousseau, Social Contract, Confessions, Emile
Hume, Enquiries, Dialogues on Natural Religion
Goethe, Faust, Sorrows of Young Werther
Nineteenth-century novel
Mill, Essay on Liberty, The Subjection of Women
Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, Beyond Good and Evil

Participants in developing the course say that in its specifics the list was not intended to be written in stone. It represented a series of compromises rather painfully hammered out by a committee, inevitably through some of the crudest kind of horse-trading—Catholics for Protestants, poets for scientists, Italians for Germans. In the end, ironically, the difficulty of negotiating the list was one source of its permanence: the process had been so painful and so lacking in intellectual integrity that no one expressed the slightest desire to repeat it.

In any case, regardless of its specific content, the list did the job of shaping the requirement in, for many people, unnecessarily narrow ways. Indeed, its extreme narrowness clearly contributed to the breakdown of the program at Stanford. Most conspicuously, the list installed a specific historical paradigm: one quarter for ancient world, one for medieval-renaissance, and one for the past five hundred years. Implicit in the sequence was the canonical narrative of origins deriving the present from classical Greece via the Italian Renaissance and the Franco-German Enlightenment, a narrative that begins and ends with European lettered high culture. (Where is America?) Clearly, teachers of the course could question that implicit narrative, and some did. But to do so in a consistent or structured way involved teaching against the grain of the syllabus, an extremely difficult pedagogical task that often confused students more than it empowered them.

Second, the list not only lays down a Eurocentric paradigm, but also embodies a very restricted sense of Europe. France and even England are barely represented in the required readings; Iberia, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia not at all. Only “high” culture is represented, an exclusion that has long been under challenge not just by the Black Students’ Union, but by whole schools of mainstream literary and historical scholarship. One thinks of the scholars at Princeton’s Center for European Studies, or the Berkeley-based new historicism, movements that are in no way radical or critical of the West, but which refuse to give “high” culture or belles lettres a monopoly on cultural understanding. Many Stanford scholars were troubled by the fact that the course organized itself around authors and orthodoxies rather than around problematic or issues, and that it therefore took as orthodoxies matters that were actually under serious debate in their fields. Translated into practice, this amounted to a structure of exclusion of faculty who took other perfectly legitimate approaches to culture and to the West, as well as of faculty who worked in non-European literatures and cultures. “For some scholars,” said one colleague, “to see a book or an entire cultural tradition as if it were a self-contained whole is like listening to only one side of a phone conversation. For these scholars there is no place in the current program.”

Third, the list implicitly suggests a monumentalist attitude to the texts as great works whose interest and value were sui generis. Again,
teachers were of course not forbidden to adopt a critical attitude, but to do so required teaching from the negative position of a counter-discourse or a heresy. What you couldn’t do was embark positively on a different project or way of thinking, even one that was equally celebratory and equally Eurocentric. An attempt was made to set up a critical track, a course titled “Conflict and Change in Western Culture.” In many ways this course was extremely successful, but its founders were constantly hampered by the structure of center and periphery into which they were locked. To bring in other texts was always to bring in “Other” texts. In the end, this structure of otherness comprises, depending on your perspective, the main obstacle to or the main bulwark against relational approaches to culture. “The notion of a core list,” argued one teacher in the history track, is inherently flawed, regardless of what kinds of works it includes or excludes. It is flawed because such a list undermines the critical stance that we wish students to take toward the materials they read. . . . A course with such readings creates two sets of books, those privileged by being on the list and those not worthy of inclusion. Regardless of the good intentions of those who create such lists, the students have not viewed and will not view these separate categories as equal.

The asymmetry can be exemplified by a remark made in support of retaining the core list. Referring to the autobiography of the West African Olaudah Equiano, published in England in the late eighteenth century, one English scholar argued that students “who have studied Genesis, Aquinas, and Rousseau have a good chance of understanding with some precision what the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano meant when he spoke of ‘that first natural right of mankind . . . independence.’” The remark, true enough in a way, easily invites some troubling inferences. Would one want to suggest that students who have not studied Genesis, Aquinas, and Rousseau have no chance of understanding Equiano? That Equiano himself would not have understood liberty without his European education? Neither inference is true in the slightest. There are plenty of readings that can serve to illuminate Equiano to American students, and these certainly include Rousseau, Aquinas, and Genesis. As for Equiano himself, no slave ever needed Rousseau or anybody else to know the difference between freedom and slavery, though a slave might find Rousseau helpful (as Equiano did) in attempting to argue matters with the enslavers. It is not from Europeans that enslaved peoples have learned how to construct cultures that conserve a sense of humanity, meaningful life, and an abiding vision of freedom in the face of the West’s relentless imperial expansion. Indeed, it is essential to reverse the direction of inference and note that students who have read Equiano have a good chance of understanding what Rousseau meant in talking about human rights and equality. From there follows the question many find deeply but unnecessarily disturbing: To what extent was Rousseau influenced indirectly by the African slaves, whose fearsome rebellions and unquenchable demands for change echoed constantly back to Europe from the colonial frontier? From an intercultural perspective, the initial statement about Equiano taken by itself reproduces a monumentalist cultural hierarchy that is historically as well as morally distortive.

Many critics felt that the Western culture program set a tone for the humanities as a whole at Stanford, in the words of one Latin Americanist, making “second-class citizens out of faculty whose work focuses on non-European literatures, on noncanonical writers, on European literatures not included in the core, or on the West in dialogue with other parts of the world.” In terms of faculty, in the years the Western culture program was in place, classics outgrew all the departments of modern languages and literatures; a Europeanist comparative literature department was founded; the English department continued to boast four medievalists while African, African-American, and Caribbean literatures in English were represented by a single half-time faculty member (whose tenure was hotly contested), and so-called “Commonwealth” literature not at all. The curriculum in French continued to include not a single course in Franco-African or even Quebecois literature. The number of Chicano faculty remained the same in 1988 as it was in 1972. A new humanities center, on the other hand, did assert a broader range, successfully seeking out interdisciplinary scholars and grants to fund minority and third world fellows.
The opposition to the Western culture curriculum that eventually coalesced at Stanford was there pretty much from the beginning. In the planning stages, it turned out, no fewer than seven other proposals for a culture requirement had been made and set aside. Several of these involved intercultural perspectives and heavily non-European materials. Right from the start many faculty in relevant fields chose not to participate in the course, including what was described as a near boycott by minority, women, and younger faculty. Then a beginning assistant professor, I recall vividly being asked to teach a section in one of the tracks. When I objected to the absence of the Iberian world and the Americas from the core list, I was told I might be invited to give a lecture on things written in Spanish since Don Quixote, "if I thought there was anything worth talking about." But really, the senior historian said, the advantage of the assignment was that it would help me avoid getting caught in a "Hispanic rut."

The fact that the course excluded or marginalized the work of many of the university’s own humanities faculty made it a good deal more expensive than anticipated. Several hundred thousand dollars a year were needed to pay instructors on short-term contracts, most of them recent Ph.D.'s in the humanities. Many of these teachers did not share the monumental project, and they too became an impetus for change, as they introduced other materials and perspectives in their sections. By the time the reform was proposed, the core list was widely tampered with and no longer enforced. Some people were teaching against the grain—but the grain was still very much there. Organized student advocacy of reform was a consistent and essential component throughout the three-year process. Student momentum began to coalesce during Rainbow Coalition activity for the 1984 election, and through the intense anti-apartheid activity of 1985–86. A coalition of student groups, including the Black Students' Union, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), the Stanford American Indian Organization, the Asian American Student Association, and Students United for Democracy in Education formed to exert continuous pressure on the reform process, from within and without.

The chronology of the reform process ran roughly as follows:

(1) In the spring of 1986 the dean of undergraduate studies, a European historian and the first woman to hold the position, appointed a task force to review the Western culture requirement and produce recommendations for the faculty senate's Committee on Undergraduate Studies. The task force consisted of three undergraduate students, two senior historians (one Europeanist and one African-Americanist), a senior philosopher (who had helped draft the original requirement), a senior woman classicist (who had taught in the "critical" track of the course), a senior Chicano administrator, and one of the lecturers in the program.

(2) Throughout the 1986–87 academic year the task force met regularly, speaking with all the relevant parties and anyone else who wished to address them. In the spring of 1987 they released an interim report calling for a reconception and restructuring of the requirement. This trial balloon provoked a great deal of discussion and response that was quite polarized.

(3) In the late autumn of 1987, believing it had the support of all relevant parties, the task force released a revised report and recommendations to the Committee on Undergraduate Studies. The report argued (in passages later deleted) that "courses that do not acknowledge in some degree both the cultural diversity of Europe and the even greater diversity of our present American society have increasingly come to seem intellectually inadequate": such courses, moreover, "have been open to the charge of being socially irresponsible, however unintentionally and inadvertently, for they seem to perpetuate racist and sexist stereotypes and to reinforce notions of cultural superiority that are wounding to some and dangerous to all in a world of such evident diversity." The report recommended a modified requirement called Culture/Ideas/Values (CIV) structured around a series of ground rules rather than a core list. Four instructional objectives were proposed which can be summarized as follows: increasing understanding of cultural diversity and interaction within the United States and elsewhere; engaging students with works that have intellectual importance "by virtue of the ideas they express, their mode of expression, or their influence": developing critical thinking; and increasing skills in reading, reasoning, arguing, and analyzing texts. Requirements for social, geographical, and historical diversity would mean courses designed to "confront issues relating to class, ethnicity,
race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation; to include the study of works by women, minorities, and persons of color; to study works from at least one European and at least one non-European culture in their own historical and cultural context; and to involve at least six to eight centuries of historical depth.

(4) In January of 1988 the new recommendations headed for the floor of the faculty senate with committee approval. At this juncture, opponents of the reform surprised many by introducing counterlegislation which retained the status quo but added one woman and one black writer to the core list for the third quarter of the course. This polarizing move set the stage for the debate that went on through the winter and into the spring. The faculty senate at Stanford is an elected body of fifty-five faculty members which inevitably includes a high proportion of senior scholars and former administrators. Given Stanford’s composition, the senate is dominated numerically by faculty from the sciences and professional schools. Advocates of the reform were unprepared for a floor fight in the senate, most of whose members had not been educated as to the stakes and the issues. Senators were prone to support the familiar status quo. On the other hand, the election of this particular senate had involved, for the first time, a small effort to promote women candidates. Though this was not done with the Western culture debate in mind, the four women elected each made crucial contributions on behalf of the reform.

It would be absurd to summarize the untold hours of meetings, statement writing and reading, corridor talk, cynical maneuvering, and brutal negotiating sessions that followed. Despite the Machiavellian dimensions, two decisions in particular gave the process a democratic character that lends credence to the outcome. First, the weekly faculty/staff newspaper announced that it would print all statements on the matter that it received from anyone. An extraordinary number and range of people responded, making this newspaper the main medium for the community debate. Within the senate, it was likewise decided that anyone who signed up to make a statement would be permitted to do so, whether or not they were a member of the senate, and again many people responded, including student representatives. Thus, within the local taboos on, say, openly racist or openly Marxist language, a fairly full range of views was expressed, with deep conviction and eloquence on all sides. (The scientists, one should note, showed no reservations about expressing themselves on the matter, though it proved extremely difficult to communicate the issues to them.) The five senate meetings on the subject were opened to anyone who requested visitor status, though visitors could not participate. As a result, senate meetings uncannily reproduced the very core-periphery structure that was under debate. In a large round amphitheater, the senators, overwhelmingly senior white men, sat in the middle while up around the outside were gathered the women faculty, the minority faculty, the students, the black and Chicano administrators, all the “other Americans” not authorized to speak, but speaking powerfully through their bodily presence. There we were on the margins, we said, but we were in the room, and something had to be constructed that came to grips with that fact.

Perhaps the biggest surprise for naive observers like myself as we listened and read was what some of us came to call the “willful ignorance” factor. It was saddening to hear academics saying please don’t make me read anything new, I refuse to agree there are things I am ignorant of that are important and worthwhile. “Does that make me a racist?” one old friend and colleague asked. What would Aretha Franklin reply, I wondered. At the same time, especially given the rantings of the official right, it is important to affirm the thoughtfulness and intellectual quality of the discussion that took place at Stanford, and to give you some examples. It was, for example, George Will and not an academic colleague who, amazingly, called for courses that “affirm this fact: America is predominantly a product of the Western tradition and is predominantly good because that tradition is good.” It was William F. Buckley, and not a Stanford professor, who displayed his ignorance by declaring that “from Homer to the nineteenth century no great book has emerged from any non-European source.” Below I offer some excerpts from what Stanford faculty and students did say, for and against the reform (the quotations are taken from statements published in the campus newspaper):

con: Education is an exercise of modesty, a process whereby we give up some of ourselves to gain an understanding of that which is not ourselves, an understanding of things still shaping us. It's a kind of surrender; we learn that some things are superior in consequence to us, even to our particular gender, to our particular ethnic heritage, to the parochialisms to which we are subject. Then the apparent for-
eignness of the past, its record of people seemingly unlike ourselves, becomes much less foreign and those people much less strange and irrelevant.

PRO: The famous texts of the past cannot continue to live for us if we simply place them on a pedestal and teach our students to worship them. Only if we see them as engaged with the stuff of history, both of the times in which they were written and of those later times, can we give a continuing life to these texts and to our cultural tradition as a whole. Only if we understand how the idea of a Western culture took shape in differing ways over the centuries and how it defined itself in relation to other forms of culture, can we justify giving it the prime consideration... to our students.

CON: As a historian of the United States I would be the last person to deny the ethnic, racial, and cultural complexity of American society. But, from the same perspective, I find it puzzling, if not troubling, to learn that some of the dominant and influential ideas in modern America are to be seen [in the new legislation] as originating outside the West. Few historians of the United States believe that the culture of this country has been seriously influenced by ideas from Africa, China, Japan or indigenous North America... There is no direct connection between the dominant ideas and institutions in American culture and the cultures of Africa or Eastern Asia. [The roots of American culture], if one is talking about ideas and institutions, are derived overwhelmingly from Europe. To contend otherwise, I think would cause American historians to scratch their heads in amazement.

PRO: A "liberal education" for our time should expand beyond the culture-bound, basically colonialist, horizon that relies, albeit subtly, on the myth of the cultural superiority of the "West" (an ill-defined entity, in any event, whose borders are ludicrously artificial)... Does the new, integrated vision of Area One entail our teaching the Greek Hermes and Prometheus alongside the North American Indian Coyote or the West African Anansi and Legba as paradigms of trickster heroes, or Japanese Noh alongside Greek drama or Indian philosophy alongside Plato? If the answer is yes, so much the better.

PRO: I was never taught in Western Culture the fact that the Khe- metric or "Egyptian" Book of the Dead contained many of the dialectic principles attributed to Greece, but was written three thousand years earlier, or the fact that Socrates, Herodotus, Pythagoras, and Solon studied in Egypt and acknowledged that much of their knowledge of astronomy, geometry, medicine, and building came from the African civilizations in and around Egypt... I was never told that algebra came from Moslem Arabs, or numbers from India. I was never informed when it was found that the "very dark and woolly-haired" Moors in Spain preserved, expanded, and reintroduced the classical knowledge that the Greeks had collected, which led to the "renaissance."... I read the Bible without knowing St. Augustine looked black like me, that the ten commandments were almost direct copies from the 147 negative confessions of Egyptian initiates, or that many of the words of Solomon came from the black pharaoh Amen-En-Eope. I didn't learn that Toussaint L'Ouverture's defeat of Napoleon in Haiti directly influenced the French Revolution or that the Iroquois Indians in America had a representative democracy which served as a model for the American system... I'm damned if my children have to go to a school that preaches diversity, then refuses to practice its own values because it was scared.

In the end, the reform legislation was passed, with some substantial amendments. One, for instance, required courses to "include treatment of ancient and medieval cultures"; another required faculty teaching in the program to agree each spring on a set of "common elements" which all tracks would share the following year. The latter amendment, which finally broke the deadlock, is a very big loophole. It leaves open the unlikely possibility of faculty agreeing to restore the entire core list, or of the whole battle being fought over in miniature every spring. At the moment, it seems more likely that the parties will learn to understand each other better through this compulsory conversation. The actual consequences of the reform remain uncertain, however. With only minor alterations, the standard Great Books course can continue to exist at Stanford, and nobody is being required to reeducate him or herself. You can certainly talk about gender without challenging sexism, or race without challenging racism, or class without challenging classism. On the other hand, a space has been made for much greater change by those who desire it. Tracks constructed around other understandings of culture and
broader perspectives on the West are now possible. Their existence and survival depends, however, on the presence of sufficient faculty to teach them, and the hiring and tenuring of such faculty is not possible without the acquiescence of those who opposed the reform. It is no accident that the final amendment passed by the senate deleted a phrase calling for the recruitment of minority faculty to teach in the new program. In the larger national picture, it seems fair to say that the new program puts Stanford in the vanguard of the rear guard, for other schools have long since left our modest reform behind. (Write, for example, for the catalog of Oglala College in Pine Ridge, South Dakota.)

Three faculty have jointly prepared a course according to the new guidelines. It is a course called Europe and the Americas which studies the European, African, and native American strands of American cultures, and the history of their interaction in the Americas. Canonical European texts retain a place in the course, but rather than forming its center of gravity, they simply coexist with American, Caribbean, Spanish-American, native-American and Anglo-American materials. “The complex interactions of colonialism, slavery, migration and immigration,” says the course’s preamble, “have produced on this side of the Atlantic societies that are highly diverse in origin, and in many cases multicultural and syncretic. European traditions play a prominent and indeed decisive role in these societies, though by no means the same roles they play in Europe.” At times the course adopts a comparative perspective—Haitian Vodun and Greek Dionysus are brought together, for instance, in a section on religious syncretism and ecstatic cults; a section on representations of the self juxtaposes the extroverted, historicized self-representation of a Navaho oral history with the confessional modes of St. Augustine and Freud. Historical dialogues are pursued—the legacy of Shakespeare’s The Tempest in Aimé Césaire’s A Tempest, José Enrique Rodó’s Ariel, and Roberto Fernández Retamar’s Calibán are examined; the give-and-take between European enlightenment discourse on human rights, American independence movements, abolitionism, and slave rebellions is considered; indigenous traditions are traced, from the ancient Mayan Popul Vuh, for instance, to the contemporary testimonio by Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchu, or from the pre-Colombian Inca state to the Spanish con-

quest (through Andean eyes) to the great Andean rebellions of the 1780s to the contemporary Quechua poetry of José María Arguedas. Terms like creolization, transculturation, and syncretism are used to develop an approach to culture that is relational and at the same time recognizes the internal fullness and integrity of particular moments and formations.

Approaches to culture and to United States culture such as those this course adopts are widespread in higher education, but are scarcely to be found in official discourse on education, not in the national media’s depictions of the curricular controversy. Partisans of reform have so far had little success at getting across in the public discourse the modes of understanding against which the monumentalist approach seems narrow and impoverished. Few people reading Bloom or Bennett, even those critical of them, can bring to bear a picture of what nonhierarchical, relational approaches to culture are or what people stand to gain from learning them. Stanford’s scientists, in being asked to vote for reform, had little idea of what they were voting for. How could they not fall back on the common sense of the man in the personals ad I quoted at the beginning who simply likes most aspects of Western civilization? (As the West Texan is supposed to have said against daylight saving time, “If central time was good enough for Jesus Christ, it’s good enough for me!”) When then Secretary Bennett and Stanford President Donald Kennedy debated the issue on the MacNeil/Lehrer Report, neither party possessed a clear picture of alternative visions of culture, the West, or the United States. Bennett knew only vaguely what he was opposing, and Kennedy what he was defending. Lehrer also seemed to be groping for an unknown. And yet, one goes on to wonder, why should the discussion remain in the hands of those three people, a remarkably uniform group? Where are the voices of those who have the most fundamental, bodily stakes in efforts for change? For the moment, those voices are not authorized to speak for “us” all, the way Bennett, Kennedy, and Lehrer can. When they are, change will have occurred.

The final amendments to the amendments on the Stanford reform were resolved in the last week of May 1988. In the days that followed, a series of local events suggested with unexpected clarity the need for
the experiment Stanford had embarked on. A student was expelled from his dormitory after a year of disruptive activity directed especially toward a gay resident assistant, culminating in an assault on the resident and the vandalizing of the dormitory lounge. The following evening, ten fraternity brothers, in defense of the expelled student’s freedom of speech, staged a silent vigil at midnight outside the dormitory lounge wearing masks and carrying candles, a gesture that seemed to deliberately invoke the customs of the Ku Klux Klan. The reactions of black students who assembled at the site ranged from terror to outrage, and the action was treated by the university as a serious racial and homophobic incident. The ten demonstrators, however, claimed complete ignorance of the associations their vigil invoked. They did not know, they said, that masks and candles at midnight had any connotations—it is just what they thought a vigil was. The following day a group of sorority women, as part of a rush ritual, performed a mock “Indian dance” around a fountain which happened to stand in the doorway of the native American student center. Asked to stop, they refused, later saying they did not intend to offend, or see the dance as offensive. It was just a tradition.

Many people did not believe these students’ pleas of ignorance. But either way, the call for educational change was reinforced. If it is possible for young adults to leave the American educational system ignorant of the history of race relations in the United States (not part of standard Western culture curricula), then something needs to change. And if a person who knows the history of race relations and their symbolizations feels free to reenact racist rituals of mockery or intimidation, something needs to change. At the same time, blame must be placed where it belongs. In pleading ignorance, the students were following the example of many of the country’s own leaders, for whom ignorance had become an acceptable standard of public life. Throughout their high school and college years these students had looked to a president who consistently showed himself to be both ignorant and utterly comfortable with his ignorance. (The Stanford incidents coincided with Reagan’s extraordinary remarks in Moscow about the “coddling” of native Americans.) For many of us exhausted by conflict that spring, these discouraging incidents reminded us of what we were fighting for.

A week later a less weighty event drew local attention, when two California students turned up as the two finalists in the National Spelling Bee. Their names were Rageshree Ramachandran, an Indian-bom American from Fair Oaks (who won), and Victor C. Wang, a Chinese American from Camarillo (who came in second). Nothing could have suggested more clearly the multicultural, multiethnic future taking shape on the West Coast. The final words in the spelling bee, the report noted, were these:udduleia (from an Englishman’s surname), araucaria (from South American indigenous language), mhoimeter (from a German electrician’s surname, spelled backwards), ovoviviparous (from Latin), caoutchouc (from another South American indigenous language, via French), stertorous (from Latin), and eugiaclal (from Greek). “Who makes up these words?” asked Victor Wang as he went down to defeat on “stertorous.” Good question, Victor. And as you head on up the educational ladder, I hope you find a system that will give you an honest and imaginative answer.

Notes