Most of the issues brought up in bell hooks' interview with Gary Olson should resonate with readers of JAC. Issues of audience and power, the pedagogical challenges of multiculturalism, and the difficulties of developing constructive self-critiques are among the topics she raises that are routinely discussed in our journals and conferences. For these reasons, it's not hard to understand why composition studies was one of the first disciplines to respond to hooks' work.

Hooks' scholarship has been important to me and my teaching for several reasons. Like Mike Rose in composition studies, she has sought an audience outside the academy and has conceived of her academic role broadly. She has not been confined by narrow disciplinary boundaries that not only limit audience but limit the voice that academics can have in public matters. For my students, this broadly defined sense of academic writing models one kind of writing that I hope they will strive for: critical, sensitive to audiences and their responses, historically minded and informed, and committed to public intervention. In the spirit of the self-contained short pieces that hooks refers to in the interview, I'd like to concentrate on five discussions that, for me, embody the issues that seem most important to my classrooms and those of my colleagues.

Writing, Audience, and Race

In the interview, hooks comments, "I think I now see myself more as a writer because it has become so evident that I have an audience, because I now get so much feedback... [F]or me writing as a writer implied mutuality." She goes on to say that "thinking about audience can be crucial for marginalized people who haven't had [a] voice but who are trying to come to grips with a
voice." If anyone needed more evidence of the importance of dialogue in the teaching of writing, hooks' insightful comments about the relationship between audience and the development of her self-concept as a writer provide it. More interesting, though, is how the sense of audience is complicated by divisions and hierarchies based on gender and race. Hooks' comment about the specific rhetorical situations of marginalized people presents one of the central pedagogical challenges of teaching composition. The issue of audience, as hooks' anecdote about Gates shows, is an issue of power. Audience in a composition classroom, so long as there are grades and the power that accompanies them, generally means the teacher. Hooks' story about the generative effect of identifying other black women as her audience points to the necessity of creating classroom contexts where marginalized students can feel this power. This is a difficult task in my classroom because positional authority of the teacher is aligned with the socially dominant categories of white and male. Women students of color must feel at best challenged and at worst silenced by this rhetorical situation. They must feel an even stronger version of censorship than hooks felt responding to Gates.

Composition studies has been at work on this issue for many years, seeking pedagogical and institutional practices that reduce the dominating authority of the teacher. For example, in my own classes I try several measures. First, I invite women writers of color into the classroom to talk about writing and authority and to listen to students' concerns about writing. Also, I use collaborative groups and allow, and even suggest, homogeneous grouping. Students of color may feel a sense of authority that emerges from these potential social and political alliances. In addition, I use texts by women of color, not just to be "representative," but also as a force that widens the rhetorical possibilities for students and lessens their sense of isolation. Furthermore, I introduce the history of writing by women of color. Hooks, in the concluding essay in *Breaking Bread*, cites the tradition of black women intellectuals, who, like women students of color in most universities today, had to write against another, more visible tradition in order to write at all. A multicultural tradition of intellectuals and literacy has to be present and obvious in a composition classroom. Finally, I imagine and act on long-term solutions to the virtual lock-out of African Americans from higher education. Affirmative action in hiring is not enough given the scarcity of African Americans in higher education. We need curricular change that will demonstrate the educational system's commitment to the success of students of color. From grade school to graduate school, we need to demonstrate—in all parts of the curriculum—support for African American history, literacy, culture. The end result of these curricular changes must be the entrance of students of color into our schools and universities as teachers, professors, and scholars, ultimately resulting in a significant change in the composition of university faculty. We must disrupt the routine association of "professor" with white and male. Affirmative action is a pedagogical issue.
Also interesting are hooks' views on composition. She says, "Those professors who have been most willing to engage cultural criticism and other ways of de-centering the West in writing are finding that their students are more deeply engaged in composition. One of the first areas of my work that I got positive feedback on was from teachers of composition..." She goes on to comment that "If we really examine the kind of composition work that has done that, I think we would see a new and renewing dimension both to composition and to the art of writing. That's why we're in danger right now with the backlash against those new interventions in curriculum and modes of teaching." This was part of hooks' answer to Olson's question, "Do you see any advantage in composition's marginalized status?" The answer, I take it, is yes and no. Yes, there's an advantage; composition's view of institutions is from the margin and that perspective encourages criticism. This may explain both composition's ability to read and use texts like hooks' and the field's interest in developing, discussing, and researching democratic pedagogies. Our institutional context is inseparable from what hooks calls the production of "new interventions in curriculum and modes of teaching."

The "no" part of the answer is that "we're in danger right now." At my campus, and at many more campuses across the country, budget cuts—year after depressing year—threaten writing programs. The politically neutral term for these cuts, "across the board," masks the real political effect. At my campus, most of our writing courses are taught by part-time instructors. These teachers are politically progressive and committed to the success of students of color. If laid off, which remains a very real threat, they will be replaced by less progressive full-time instructors, most of whom have little training or interest in the teaching of writing. Politically progressive institutional allies of composition programs like the writing center (which serves a large number of students of color) and the writing across the disciplines program (which has conducted workshops on collaborative learning, student diversity, and the politics of education) all are threatened. Budget cuts, handled this way, are politically conservative. There is no advantage to the margin when the center has the power to cut you off the map.

Hooks was probably referring to an ideological backlash which has reared its ugly head on campuses across the country. Popular books like The Closing of the American Mind, Illiberal Education, and others have emboldened and wrongly legitimated conservative and racist views, including the bizarre (and frighteningly common) view that affirmative action is racist! Despite the quirkiness of the ideological backlash, its effects are anything but eccentric. Newer faculty, hired under more serious affirmative action guidelines, are threatened, silenced, hurt, and discouraged by this backlash. These faculty—the ones "willing to engage cultural criticism," the ones whose students are most "deeply engaged"—are frequently the best teachers of women and students of color.
Multiculturalism and Revolution

Hooks says, "The movement toward a multicultural pedagogy was really, to me, tantamount to a revolution; and, like revolutions on all levels in culture, there are times of chaos. Many of us thought we'd make this transition without chaos, and I think partially most of us develop pedagogical practices that don't in anyway include strategies for dealing with confusion and chaos." This answer, along with the next one, were the two places where I felt a sense of distance between hooks' perspective and mine. For most of the interview, I felt that we were looking at a similar world and thinking similarly about institutional politics, multicultural teaching, writing, and activism; but here I felt there must be a gap somewhere in our experiences. What revolution? I felt like Mark Twain: "Reports of the death of monocultural pedagogy have been vastly exaggerated." Hooks, I know, is probably better aware of the opposition to multiculturalism than I am. But I do think there's a danger in thinking of multiculturalism as a revolution that has already occurred. The small changes toward more inclusiveness and diversity in our curriculum and pedagogy don't seem anything like a revolution. And even those small changes are in danger of backsliding into monoculturalism. Stanford University changed the requirements in only one of its required courses and the apoplectic response from conservatives was astonishing; you would have thought it was the Death of Western Civilization As We Know It. Actually, there's been minuscule success in hiring people of color in universities across the country, baby steps toward a more inclusive, more constructive curriculum, pedagogical changes only by a tiny few, and only a slight increase in the representation of students of color in higher education (after a drop in the 1980s). Yet, the repressive response to these changes is outrageous, like smashing a fly with a hammer.

Of course, we should not be blind to progress. A colleague of mine also recently taught a seminar on Toni Morrison's work, and she would have not received any flack had she not taught it under the title "Major American Authors." What worries me is that the success of the revolution will be measured by the addition of a few texts by women and people of color. These additions may signal a more general revolution, but they may be simply a way of accommodating the protests of students of color and a few faculty: add some texts; avoid some conflict (see Graff for a sense of the history of this way of accommodating change). What's needed for a revolution is a far more fundamental change in the level of respect that educational institutions confer on women and people of color, their language, their culture, their history, their knowledge. Morrison and Walker can function too easily as literary exceptions while the texts by students of color are still treated as deficient. It is certainly progress to be having conversations like this one in major journals, but the material conditions of programs, classrooms, and curricula have got to change.
The other answer that did not correspond with my own perspective is when hooks' comments, "I was trying to think... through a notion of how we might use the place of passion in the classroom to diffuse hierarchy and to create a sense of community. Students would actually come up to me and whine, 'There's a way that you hug this student or talk to that student, and I want you to look at me the way you look at Johnny'... I said, 'Why is it that none of you think that if I look at Johnny this way, I must be willing to look at you this way, too.... Why can't you think that I have this space of care that can enlarge to include everyone?'" This place in the interview created in me "one of those little moments of uproar, tension, and dissent" that hooks referred to as opportunities in her classroom. Hooks has written a great deal about the authority of the teacher; it is a theme that runs throughout this interview, too. She has been one of a number of people who have seen the issue of the teacher's authority as not simply something that you give away, but as a more complex bundle of legitimate and illegitimate power. The source of my discomfort in this particular discussion is both in the students' focus on physical demonstrations of affection and hooks' own sense that what's wrong with the picture is that the students are imagining a scarcity of affection that they have to compete for. Hooks disapproves of the competition, while I'm uncomfortable with the focus on "passion" defined this way. My objection is that this kind of passion is entirely teacher-centered and functions through institutional position, much like grading. It is entirely hers, even if, as she wishes, they would understand that she has enough for all. It isn't the kind of passion that students can take up independently of hooks; it's located in a relationship with her physical presence.

I think that part of the source of my discomfort is that, for me, the history of passion in the classroom has been a history of exploitation. I can't think of it apart from the violence it has caused in the lives of many women, especially. On my campus, there is currently a group of professors who wish to deny the existence of widespread sexual harassment by professors, claiming that it's based on (as one professor put it) "spectral" evidence. So my discomfort about construing passion in this way is located both in my local, institutional politics and in my position as a white male.

Hooks' institutional position and her social location make her perspective on this issue much different from mine and the issue of passion far less charged with dominance. Yet, I still couldn't construct a way of defusing hierarchy and creating a sense of community from this definition of passion without hooks' developing this point further (as she most likely does in her article) and showing how passion defined this way creates a classroom where students become more critical and more responsible.

The Politics of Literacy
Hooks' sense of critical vision does not protect her own field, nor should rhetoric and composition be spared from self-critique. She writes, "The class
standpoint of much feminist theory leads to a deprivileging of and a disre-
spect for the politics of reading and writing, and this has become all the more
rampant with the privileging of metalinguistic theory over other forms of
tory, increasing the sense that it's a waste of time to think about reading
writing." Almost all English departments and many composition
programs within them also deprivilege the everyday study of reading and
writing as it occurs in settings outside the academy. One of the consequences
of composition's history as a service course is that the study of writing in
social and cultural contexts has not been a major part of our discipline's work.
Only recently have studies of literacy outside the academy been taken up by
composition scholars, thanks mainly to progressives like Patricia Bizzell,
Linda Brodkey, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Beverly Moss, J. Elspeth Stuckey,
Judith Rodby, John Trimbur, and others. So while the teaching of college
writing has a long history of study, the study of literacy practices outside of the
university has not been at the center of composition studies. Because of the
separation of "intellectual" from "public," which hooks seeks to unify in this
interview and in her publications, college teachers of writing do an especially
bad job of educating students whose literacy practices vary from dominant
practices. For instance, much of the history of literacy practices by African
Americans has taken place outside the academy. One of the reasons for this
is that institutional literacy has tended to be used as a weapon against African
Americans. The literacy requirements for voting, as hooks points out,
continue a practice that has antecedents in Southern efforts to hold on to Jim
Crow culture in the 1940s and 50s, including what Manning Marable calls
"Kafkaesque" literacy requirements for voting. He cites one white registrar
who asked black potential voters the question, "How many bubbles are in a
bar of soap?" (26). While we may sneer at such tactics, we ought to look twice
at our own placement and proficiency tests, whose questions function
essentially in the same way. How different is it to ask a potential university
student to write in thirty minutes an answer to an abstract question to an
unknown audience? The literacy practices in institutions are not neutral to
most marginalized students. They are oppositional and thus pose an addi-
tional challenge to radical educators who must not only help students
imagine literacy as constructive intervention, but must undo, unteach, the
expectation that all literacy in institutions works against their interests.

Our ignorance of everyday literacy practices, because of the elitist
history of English department scholarship, also blinds us to the history of
literacy practices that have worked to resist domination. Anne Gere's study
of women's writing groups in the nineteenth century is one such history;
another is Janet Duitsman Cornelius' fascinating look at African American
literacy practices in the South before the Civil War. While students, if they're
lucky, may have heard about how slave owners used every means available to
prevent slaves from reading and writing, and they may have also read
Douglass' autobiography, I doubt that they know of the widespread resis-
tance to this oppression. Literacy instruction, especially writing, was common and connected to central values of freedom and education. African Americans have both a long and a powerful history of writing for social action. When “literacy” is separated both from “literature” and from “composition,” these progressive examples of uses of literacy outside the academy are lost to us and our students. Bell hooks’s insistence on the connection between activism and literacy reconnects the academy with the political world it inhabits and reconnects us with the political work that we have a responsibility to take up.

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Works Cited


Speech-Acts, Conventions, and Voice: Challenges to a Davidsonian Conception of Writing

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I found the interview with Donald Davidson in the winter *JAC* to be both enlightening and provocative. In the fall edition, Reed Way Dasenbrock’s response to the interview did much to place Davidson’s ideas in a context in which rhetoric and compositionists can see more clearly the issues that are at stake as we continue to ground our teaching practices in workable theories.