



# Hearing the Silence

## *Women's and Black Studies in the College Curriculum*

BY CHERYL JETTER

I could not have written this article five years ago. Women's studies? Black studies? Ethnic studies? I didn't know what they were, and had no time to find out. I was involved in an ambitious academic program encompassing the whole of Western painting, sculpture, music, architecture, drama, and thought—or so it seemed. I was much too busy to think about the “peripherals” of the traditional curriculum.

What has happened since then? I've spent five years reading for a dissertation. Five years observing institutional practices. Five years observing the organized forms and symbolic language of Western art. Ten times I've organized and taught the history curriculum of Western art and architecture and studied its meanings. I've seen a great deal of culture doing this, and heard a great deal of silence besides.

### **Thundering Silence**

The silence is thunderous. Students hear it from their seats, the teacher from her podium. Why are there no people of color portrayed in painting? Where were they during this period? Why do we study only the monumental works of architecture? How did people build their homes during this time? Why have there been no great women artists?

The last query echoes the title of a 1971 essay by Linda Nochlin,<sup>1</sup> which asked art historians some hard questions. The essay examined critically the silence surrounding the production of art and the social situations of artists. It asked a number of questions:

- Why have we not investigated systems of patronage, sentiments, and family power?
- What social conditions have enabled artists to pursue their craft?
- What is the nature of artistic “greatness”?

Nochlin points out the longtime preference for judging artists on the basis of their individual “genius”—as if genius alone produced great art. If this were true, she concludes, then one would have to assume that there are no great women artists or black artists because women and blacks are incapable of genius.

Could it be, she wondered, that a “great” artist is created not so much by talent as by social opportunity, encouragement, networking, and expectations? Are such qualities determined by influences from one's social, economic, racial, and gender background? Nochlin suggests that scholars' definition of greatness may depend upon what they value.

### **Controlling Influences**

Behind Nochlin's argument lies the supposition that each social class is held together by a way of thinking and feeling. For instance, she changes the question about blacks and women to read, “Why are there no great artists from the aristocracy?” While there are plenty of dabblers, and some excellent amateurs, the aristocracy shares one thing in common with women—it has produced no Michelangelos, no Rembrandts. Why? Possibly because of “the kinds of demands and expectations placed before both aristocrats and women,” Nochlin suggests, “the amount of time necessarily devoted to social func-

tions [which] simply made total devotion to professional art production out of the question.”<sup>2</sup>

We could include other influences on various groups: the amount of time that blacks and working-class people must expend on economic survival, the lack of arts education and opportunities in many schools, and the myths about genius and talent that surround arts production, which have excluded all but the most tenacious and self-assured.

But what has this to do with classes in women's, black, and

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ethnic studies? Questions and problems such as the ones Nochlin outlines have generated a tremendous amount of scholarly activity in nearly every traditional discipline during the past three decades. Women, blacks, various ethnic groups, and scholars are exploring their own experiences, asking questions about Western life and its social institutions from their own gender, class, and ethnic perspectives.

### **A Deeply Felt Need**

An explosion of information about the cultural production and practice of these people has recently appeared. Much of this information is being produced, organized, and disseminated in the various studies' classes and programs. Obviously this is no passing fad. College courses in Women's Studies alone have increased from fewer than 20 in 1969 to more than 30,000 in 1986.<sup>3</sup> Today there are at least nine Ph.D. programs in Black Studies. These programs are obviously responding to a deeply felt need.

Today I wonder why I considered these classes "peripheral." Obviously, the concerns they address are not peripheral to those groups, or to the educational curriculum. Then why did they seem peripheral to me for so long? Because I did not think that they could teach me anything. I needed "real" information for my academic ambitions, the data collected by generations of "real" scholars whose achievements have been recognized and disseminated through a curriculum of traditional classes.

### **A Question of Meaning**

As I studied I began to realize that scholarly approaches, methodologies, and even curricula also have human meaning, since they are rooted in questions that were meaningful to someone at a particular time and place. As I taught I began to wonder whether the incredible amount of "boring" material in textbook anthologies didn't seem dull because it lacked social meaning that my students and I could share.

As a result, I began to address the silences in my art history classes, exploring the new scholarship on the place of women and minorities in the arts. The insights gained were devastating to me and to my students.

- Women are seen as the objects rather than the subjects of art. Minorities

barely have any place in them at all.

- Both women and minorities have their own highly developed forms of art, forms that have been relegated to the category of "craft" and dismissed from the texts.

- Individual genius begins to look suspiciously exploitative. The textbook concerns for style and chronology seem strangely abstract and disconnected from reality. Standards for judging the "greatness" of one work or artist over another appear frivolous.

As they explored these concepts, my students became more critically responsive. After the bell rang, they walked out in little groups, talking about the class. They began to make connections between

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art and their other classes, between art and their personal and social lives. They also began to research from a more personal point of view, and to hear the silences for themselves as they browsed through library materials.

### **How to Handle the New Scholarship**

I quickly learned to respect the power of the new scholarship. Many teachers believe that studies classes are too specialized for the curriculum. They suggest that traditional classes be opened a bit by including some information about and works by women and minorities. But it is not that simple.

When traditional materials clash with those produced by the powerless or exploited, this results in a "deconstruction" of the classes as they once were

taught. A whole system of thought topples around us.

Why does this happen? Jacques Derrida, a contemporary French philosopher and teacher, describes how a First Principle (a single idea given prominence over others) works to organize a philosophical text. The First Principle can be recognized as "first" only if it acts in the presence of an "Other," which is relegated to second place.

The work of the First Principle, then, is to maintain control of its position. In the meantime, the secondary Other must agree not to breach the boundary between itself and the First Principle. If it does, the First Principle collapses because it loses its preeminence. In other words, the First Principle and its excluded Others must perform a strange, interconnected dance to maintain their identities. If one or the other refuses to dance, the system collapses.

### **Just Another Social Construct**

When the views of the excluded Others gain credibility, the First Principle loses its privileged status. This is called "deconstruction."<sup>4</sup> I discovered this phenomenon when I discussed with my classes the place of women and minorities in the arts: a "core" (First Principle) textbook featuring mostly white, male, and "great" painters, sculptors, and architects began to look like the protected curriculum of someone's ideology when its "noncore" elements were no longer excluded. In other words, its sacred list of "greats" was exposed as just another social construct.

It has become increasingly obvious to many scholars and educators that, in general, the traditional curricula of many disciplines are social constructs. These disciplines have from their beginnings overlooked the experiences, viewpoints, and production of women, slaves, minority and colonized groups, and even working-class people.

Scholars concerned about these omissions have concluded that simply squeezing the neglected "others" into the curriculum is not the answer. Instead, they believe that the values underlying the traditional curriculum need to be critically examined. What determines our definitions of greatness and quality? Who has decided the values that drive our curricular judgments, and for what purposes? How have these values served

to exclude the majority of peoples?

### **A Twofold Purpose**

Classes and programs in women's, black, and various ethnic studies serve at least a twofold purpose: first, to give *place* to a wealth of new research and to the scholars and teachers who accumulate and dispense it; and second, to give *time* for curriculum developers to develop structures that can more easily absorb the theories, methodologies, and results of the new scholarship. This will give a "place" to the dispossessed minorities. It will give them a voice in reporting their own experiences, their contributions, their struggles. Students will get to see the whole picture in history, art, literature, and other disciplines.

### **Interdisciplinary Approach Needed**

To accomplish these goals, curricula will have to accommodate movement across disciplines. Teachers will need to collaborate in their research and teaching. For instance, much of the material I present on women and minorities in a typical art history class grows out of interpretative models developed by sociology and psychology.

Also, since art is a form of language, much of the new material is based in language and literary theory. How can I present this when my own background is in formal, stylistic studies? And, if I do present it, what techniques

*do I have to use to engage students who expect each discipline to display its own boundaries and expound its own uniqueness?*

For the time being, then, classes and programs in women's, black, and ethnic studies are the repositories for some of the curricula anomalies created by an added research perspective. But the very presence of these classes in the traditional list of college courses raises other questions. How should these classes relate to a "core" curriculum of required

general-education classes? Do they offer materials and perspectives that all students should encounter in their education? How do these classes relate to Adventist education's goals of educating people to carry a Christian message into the societies they seek to serve?

### **Why Offer Black, Ethnic, and Women's Studies?**

The value of "studies" programs in the curriculum is well illustrated by an experience recounted by Anne Schaefer.<sup>5</sup> Dur-

Following some discussion, the blacks completed the three lists. The whites, after "increasing frustration," managed to list only characteristics that the races had in common. By way of defense, they claimed that they didn't want to look at the differences that separate people. In the discussion that followed, however, it became obvious that the whites had difficulty perceiving differences, while the blacks did not.

The blacks, excluded from "normal" society, had become aware of themselves as a distinct group with an identity that they could describe with a list of characteristics. Since they depended upon the larger white society for their economic survival, they were aware of the whites as different, as a group with its own identifying characteristics.

The whites, who had access to most of society's opportunities and institutions, had not perceived themselves as having differences from blacks; they were all of reality, not just a part of it. Whites could not recognize distinguishing differences between groups because they had not experienced them in the same way.

Schaefer's insights helped me identify my own prejudices. However, her research probably would not have struck a responsive chord if I had not already become conscious of two things: first, my own social difference as a woman, and second, a concept of social "systems" that has allowed me to avoid blaming social problems on

*ing the height of the civil-rights movement* Schaefer was asked to give a workshop on racial issues. She designed and administered an exercise to stimulate discussion.

First, she grouped the participants by race, an action that imitated society at the time. Then she instructed each group to make three lists: a list of characteristics they perceived as unique to the black race, another of characteristics unique to the white race, and a final list of characteristics shared by both races.

*individuals, groups, and the gods and to put the responsibility on social structures, constructs, and institutionalized world views.*

### **Describing Social Reality**

For me, this is the value of classes and programs in women's, black, and ethnic studies. They offer a way for students to see and identify their own social group as it relates to other groups. They describe social reality as a construct built from numerous systems and their interrela-

tionships. This keeps students from viewing society as a contest between embittered individuals and groups.

Best of all, the "studies" classes provide opportunities for students and teachers to observe the world together through different lenses and perspectives. Not just the perspectives of "great" individuals—a technique traditionally used in humanities courses—but also of social groups, and of individuals who experience material and spiritual existence as part of those groups, participants in a "systemic" way of experiencing reality.

According to Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel, "the purpose of [this] 'raised consciousness' is not to impose reality but to be less oblivious to what is already present. The issue is not a new vision, but to see what is already there and has always been there, and to see it from a fuller perspective. The problem [is] more one of 'for those who have eyes to see, let them see, for those who have ears to hear, let them hear.'"<sup>6</sup>

There are, of course, political ramifications in these ways of perceiving the world around us. One cannot help but observe the power structures of groups and systems once their existence has been pointed out.

So far, many of these power structures appear to adhere to a single First Principle, one that Riane Eisler calls "dominator-dominated."<sup>7</sup> In this model of social reality, one group or individual is lifted up and held in place by means of another. Many people who fear feminism and multiculturalism unconsciously perceive reality in terms of this First Principle: if men don't dominate, then women will; if whites don't stay "in control," then blacks and others will "take over."

One of the tasks of the new scholarship has been to imagine other principles and models on which society can build its systems, ones with a less rigid structure than either-or, superior-inferior, oppressor-oppressed, etc.

The research and teaching activities of women's, black, and ethnic studies offer theoretical tools, not only for critiquing scholarly methods of research and interpretation, but also for examining social systems of belief and practice.

#### **Insight or Ideology?**

Critics charge that the new research perspective has become an ideology, another means for describing what is acceptable

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and unacceptable, right and wrong, true and false.

We must take these charges seriously. However, the tools for critiquing power structures can easily be turned upon themselves. In each women's, black, and ethnic studies class there should be time and space given to self-criticism, to

asking, What is of lasting worth?

While observing this caution, we must not discount the contributions of the new scholarship. As I was doing research for this article, I ran across an essay written during the recent Middle East war. In it, Edward Said implicates Arab scholars, thinkers, and educators, pointing out their lack of critical attention to the systems of power that shaped the region, systems that did not speak for the larger culture of the people. "We need to know [from those who have the analytical tools]," he wrote, "what it is about the present that we should hold on to, and how. What is just, why is it just, why should we hold on to it?"<sup>8</sup> Classes in women's studies, black studies, and ethnic studies can help to provide these insights. ☞

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### For Additional Reading

Pearson, Carol, Donna Shavlik, and Judith Touchton, eds. *Educating the Majority*. American Council on Education and the Macmillan Publ. Co., New York, 1989, especially the following essays:

Bernard, Jessie, "Educating the Majority: The Feminist Enlightenment," pp. 413-440.

Boxer, Marilyn, "Women's Studies, Feminist Goals, and the Science of Women," pp. 184-204.

McIntosh, Peggy Means, "Curricular Re-Vision," pp. 400-412.

Wilkerson, Margaret, "Majority, Minority, and the Numbers Game," pp. 25-31.

Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society*. New York: Methuen, 1987. (See interview with Jacques Derrida and Edward Said for the social implications of literary theory.)

The Chronicle of Higher Education:

January to July 1991. Almost every issue contains at least one news or opinion article that relates to the current perspectives in research, multiculturalism, black studies, etc. The following are especially insightful:

Coughlin, Ellen K. "In Jefferson Lecture, Historian Assails New Approaches to Studying the Past" (May 1, 1991), A4 & A5.

Erickson, Peter. "Rather Than Reject a Common Culture, Multiculturalism Advocates a More Complicated Route By Which to Achieve It" (June 26, 1991), B1-B3.

Magner, Denise K. "Ph.D. Program Stirs a Debate on the Future of Black Studies" (June 19, 1991), A1, A13.

Winkler, Karen J. "Challenging Traditional Views, Some Historians Say Their Scholarship May Not Be Truly Objective" (Jan. 16, 1991), A4-A6.

Since December 1990 articles have appeared in *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Time* (July 8, 1991) relating

to the controversy over multicultural education and black/women's/minority studies programs.

For a look at some strong opposition, see the Spring 1991 issue of *Campus: America's Student Newspaper*, published by the *Intercollegiate Studies Institute*.

### REFERENCES

1. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

3. Jessie Bernard, "Educating the Majority: The Feminist Enlightenment," in Carol Pearson, Donna Shavlik, and Judith Touchton, eds., *Educating the Majority* (New York: American Council on Education and the Macmillan Publ. Co., 1989), p. 432.

4. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983).

5. Anne Wilson Schaef, *Women's Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 13-15.

6. Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel, *The Addictive Organization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), pp. 45, 46.

7. See introduction to Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

8. Edward Said, "Thoughts on War: Ignorant Armies Clash by Night," *The Nation* (Feb. 11, 1991), n.p. Cited in "Quotable," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 27, 1991), B3.