

# The 'Ins and Outs' of Public Intellectualism

By Lorraine Ouimet

Recently, I asked some of my colleagues to comment on a piece I had written about Spike Lee's movie *He Got Game*. The essay in question, while praising the artistry of the film, critiques Lee's frivolous treatment of domestic violence and his use of female characters as thematic and scopophonic devices.

When discussing with me their reaction to the paper, my colleagues confessed that the popular writing style I had chosen to use—what they referred to as the “low language” and “colloquial tone”—disturbed them.

This anecdote represents dilemmas I am facing both as an academic and as a teacher of writing. As an academic concerned with race and culture, I am struggling with ways to bridge the gap between the academic work I am producing and the culture about which I am writing.

My second struggle concerns my role as a teacher of writing and

my attempt to find a pedagogical approach that would allow me to play the role of a classroom mediator helping in the *creation of knowledge* rather than occupying the authoritative position of a *dispenser of knowledge*.

In other words, I am striving to find a way to guide students in the crafting of “legitimate” academic writing and argumentative skills without imposing what I consider a prescribed, restrictive, and ideologically loaded style of writing and thinking. It is from these inquisitive struggles that my interest in public intellectualism evolves.

Public intellectualism has been denounced as an attempt by unhappy humanist scholars to give themselves a false sense of importance, or as a way for mediocre scholars to avoid the intellectual heavy lifting necessary to the production of sound academic scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

On the contrary, because public intellectuals adeptly negotiate the

---

*Lorraine Ouimet is a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida, writing her dissertation on the use of the supernatural in contemporary African American literature. She is currently working on developing pedagogical approaches to teaching African American texts in the computerized classroom.*

***Public intellectualism provides models of intervention both at the level of writing and pedagogical practices.***

---

boundaries between diverse groups, contexts, and disciplines, their scholarly contributions to the academic and cultural spheres are often fresh, vigorous, and accessible.

As Henry Giroux points out, their work may help us to rethink the university as a crucial public sphere and public intellectuals may help us articulate a new version of the role and nature of education.<sup>2</sup> Public intellectualism, thus, provides me with models of intervention both at the level of writing and pedagogical practices.

In his historical study of American intellectual culture, Russell Jacoby identifies several shifts in the kinds of public intellectualisms practiced in the United States. One shift occurred in the 1960s, when many unaffiliated intellectuals sought the security that the specialized confines of academia could offer.<sup>3</sup>

Intellectual life, Thomas Bender explains, “was tightened as people of ideas were inducted, increasingly through the emerging university system, into the restricted worlds of specialized discourse.”<sup>4</sup> From the coveted halls of academia, then, emerged a body of highly specialized knowledge, departmentalized in an orthodox and impervious manner. Until the 1980s, that is.

In the early 1980s, cultural studies made its way into the acad-

emy and eroded the divides between disciplines.

Some scholars describe cultural studies as performing not only a critique of a particular disciplinary body of knowledge, but also a critique of the institutions that produce this knowledge. This critical process promotes a re-evaluation of the divisions between academic disciplines, and between the university and the public sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Cultural studies’ endeavor against the fragmentation of knowledge(s) and disciplines within academia has created space for such movement as multiculturalism and critical theories such as feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism.

In fact, it is in the wake of these political movements and theories that the “PC Wars” gained momentum, bringing to the forefront of American intellectualism a battalion of conservative public intellectuals determined to protect the elitist, professionalized environment of the academy.

This surge of public criticism and assault on multiculturalism by right wingers of various stripes was intended, according to some critics, to keep the university’s internal systems of discrimination camouflaged by implying that the danger to the university lies not in its own racism, but in an alien multiculturalism force coming from the

***An open system of knowledge production might encourage a more equitable distribution of cultural power.***

outside.<sup>6</sup>

This attack from the right on academia posits that liberals were then—and are today—dominating academia. But despite its liberal majority, the university houses vocal orthodox members.

Conservatives, such as Stanley Fish, hold on to ideals of tightly compartmentalized disciplines and refuse to entertain the possibility that a more open system of knowledge production might be conducive to, among other things, a more equitable distribution of cultural power.

In *Professional Correctness*, Fish discusses his resistance to a cross-fertilization of knowledge between disciplines. His objections are defined by a concern for a loss of identity for the disciplines as well as for the scholars belonging to these disciplines. He argues that a particular practice defines itself by what it is not—or by presenting itself as doing something specific—not by doing everything.

**O**n the other end of the debate, liberals are concerned with the hegemonic control over the production and dissemination of knowledge resulting from the present system of disciplinary divisions. Charles Bernstein, for example, argues that professionalization stymies intellectual growth.

The production of ignorance rather than knowledge, according to Bernstein, results from the narrow definition of disciplines and specializations. These confining disciplinary practices constrain academic research, “supposedly in the name of professionalization but actually in the service of containment and control.”<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that the fragmented landscape of higher education is quickly being altered—a direct result of the solid grounding of cultural studies in the soil of academia. And it is out of this changing environment that the new breed of public intellectuals operates.

The conservative public intellectuals of the 1980s and early 1990s fought against the insurgence of cultural studies. Conversely, the public intellectuals of the later 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century are promoting a more hybrid intellectual landscape. Their goal is to make more elastic the boundaries between disciplines and between academe and the public sphere, bringing together certain critical and pedagogical discourses that traditionally have been kept apart.

Cultural studies scholars, especially those who write for popular forums, have been criticized for producing less than thorough scholarship—or “highfalutin babble” to use

***Cultural studies translates into academic language a reality that already exists ‘out there.’***

---

Adolph Reed’s expression. These scholars, concerned with bridging the gap between the academy and the various sites of cultural production, can be said to belong to what Jeffrey Di Leo and Christian Moraru refer to as the “post-theory” generation.

They share “a commitment to descending from textuality into particulars of everyday life.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, many cultural theorists work against the grain of academic protocol by writing for and about bigger and less exclusive audiences than each other.

The philosopher Hilary Putnam, for example, has recently dismissed 10 years’ worth of work on analytic philosophy she felt was irrelevant, except for perhaps “the intuition’ of a handful of philosophers.”<sup>9</sup>

Also concerned with this issue, Michael Bérubé insists:

...if our academic criticism cannot be popularized, then we who champion “cultural studies” and “interdisciplinarity” should give up the self-congratulatory claim to have broken with the narrow specializations and arbitrary exclusions of academic disciplines. I’m making a Bakhtinian claim here: unless theory-speak gets translated into demotic vulgarisms *it don’t*, as another Duke once said, *mean a thing*.<sup>10</sup>

Although Bérubé calls for a popularization of academic criticism, he also lays claim to the fact that ultimately cultural theory is *already* popular. What cultural studies does, then, is translate into academic language a reality that already exists “out there.”

**T**he people living in the cultural communities about which cultural theorists theorize “are doing the stuff we talk about.” They just do it in a different voice. What really takes place is more of an exchange. But for this exchange to be profitable to both parties, when writing academic cultural scholarship, we must “try to imagine nonacademic readers who ask only that the languages of academic criticism be translated into their languages.”<sup>11</sup>

Cultural studies does not ask that we compromise theory or sacrifice complexity of thought for accessibility of language. It simply favors a change in the way we communicate theory. Di Leo and Moraru stress that practicing post-theory means doing things with theory rather than doing theory *per se*.<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that theory should always be approached with pragmatism. And while we should not base theory’s merits on the level of its applicability, neither should we devalue it on account of

***The cultural theorist's and the public intellectual's relationship with theory is a complex one.***

its pragmatism.

The cultural theorist's and the public intellectual's relationship with theory is a complex one, for in theory lies the counterproductive contingency of a return to academic professionalization. This issue is cogently addressed in Kurt Spellmeyer's "After Theory: From Textuality to Attunement with the World." Spellmeyer demonstrates how we sometimes become "trapped in theory, and trapped so inextricably that even our most careful efforts to escape keep returning us to the isolation that drove us from theory in the first place."<sup>13</sup>

Spellmeyer recounts his own experience with the liberating nature of theory. His initial encounter took place in a Princeton bookstore at a moment of great professional difficulty. He had just attended a long and depressing meeting of New Jersey's Basic Skills Council, during which alarming data on the state of illiteracy was discussed.

During this meeting, Spellmeyer came to the disturbing realization that despite his professional expertise, the distance between him and the people to whom the members of the council referred as "skill deficient" seemed unbridgeable.

That day, in the bookstore, he picked up a copy of Gadamer's *Truth*

and *Method*, a book that Spellmeyer claims gave him "the means to change nearly everything about what [he] did and who [he] was."<sup>14</sup> Gadamer's work enabled Spellmeyer to connect with the students—mostly Black or Hispanic, almost always lower class—from whom he felt so removed. Theory, in this instance, becomes a tool used in the dismantling of boundaries; a tool that allows a rapprochement between the teacher and his students.

But even when theory is approached as a tool capable of weakening the power structure between powerful and powerless, dominant and dominated, it has the potential of becoming yet another instrument of oppression and division.

Cultural studies' transgression of borders doesn't eradicate the danger of simply formulating new master narratives. bell hooks is concerned about this very issue. She asks philosopher Cornel West and British sociologist and cultural critic Paul Gilroy "how, in the U.S., cultural studies can avoid simply reproducing a more sophisticated group of people who are interpreting the experience of the 'other' under the guise of identifying themselves as comrades and allies."<sup>15</sup>

Public intellectuals and cultural critics must perform the important task of keeping each other on

***It is the work of Black public intellectuals such as bell hooks and Michael Dyson that I find most engaging.***

---

their toes by critically engaging with each other's work and by creating a discourse community that allows for a critical dialogue to take place. It is in fact the work of Black public intellectuals such as bell hooks and Michael Dyson that I find most engaging. I am drawn in by how these critics maneuver the borders between academic forums and the op-ed pages, between the various academic disciplines, between the inside/outside duality. I am attracted to their genuine commitment to "navigating the color line."

I borrow this notion of navigation from Michael Dyson, whose ability to navigate the color line works toward breaking down what Cornel West refers to as the "paradox of race in America."<sup>16</sup> In *Race Matters*, West explains that the failure of Black and white people to connect is "what binds us even more tightly together."<sup>17</sup>

Dyson directs his critique of Black culture to both Black and white audiences, encouraging a dialogue not only between members of Black communities but between Black and white parties as well.

White intellectuals are too often unwilling, or simply uninterested, in participating in the discourse on race. Or, Black intellectuals sometimes choose to exclude whites, having found previous

attempts to discuss racial oppression with whites at best unsatisfying, and at worst offensive. But Dyson understands that to exclude whites, the perpetrators of systematic racist oppression, from the very discourse that seeks to eradicate this racist oppression is counterproductive.

Dyson's straddling of boundaries does not limit itself to the divisions between races and between academic and non-academic discourses. His work is ripe with attacks on binarisms, the more provocative of which is an attempt to merge body and soul within the borders of the Black church.<sup>18</sup> In a wonderful passage that vibrates with the tones and rhythms of an engrossing and skillful sermon, Dyson brilliantly connects the body and the soul in a most sensual embrace:

There is a relentless procession, circulation, and movement of black bodies in the black church: the choir gliding in and grooving to the rhythmic sweep of a grinding gospel number...the church mother shaking with controlled chaos as the Holy Ghost rips straight through her vocal cords down to her abdomen; the soloist's hands gesturing grandly as she bends

***The mind/body split is an enduring and soundly rooted dichotomy in the world of academe.***

each note into a rung on Jacob's ladder to carry the congregation "higher and higher"; the ushers' martial precision as they gracefully guide guests to a spot where they might get a glimpse of glory; the choir director calling for pianissimo with a guileless "shhh" with one hand as the other directs the appointed soprano to bathe the congregation in her honey-sweet "ha-lay-loo-yuh"; and the preacher, the magnificent center of rhetorical and ritualistic gravity, fighting off disinterest with a "you don't hear me"....<sup>19</sup>

In a Black theological epistemology, the nexus between body and soul is not to be denied. After all, "[i]n the black church, it's all about the body: the saved and sanctified body, the fruitful and faithful body, working and waiting for the Lord." Dyson claims there is a "profound kinship between spirituality and sexuality," and, on this basis, he calls for a theology of sexuality, of eroticism, and of queerness.<sup>20</sup>

This appeal to sensuality, to a unified notion of body and soul, entices me. For if Dyson can reunite spirituality and sexuality, perhaps there is hope for a coming together of the intellect and emotional. But the mind/body split is an enduring and soundly rooted dichotomy in the world of academe—thanks to

Plato who denounced the senses as detrimental to the acquisition of knowledge—despite the effort by some scholars to infuse the product of intellectual labor with a provocative element of physicality.

**R**ichard Shusterman, for example, in an attempt to promote an understanding of rap music and culture within academic circles, writes:

[I do not] wish to suggest that intellectual analysis is the only right way for intellectuals to understand rap. Another, in some respect better, way of getting it (and "getting down with it") is by dancing. Yes, even for intellectuals. One way should not exclude the other, and Nietzsche, in advocating a dancing philosopher, was not recommending a philosopher who didn't think.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, anthropologist Paul Stoller calls for scholarship that displays a merging of head and heart, one that would awaken the scholar's body from "a long sleep in the background of scholarly life." Cognition, he argues, is physical. He insists on the use of senses such as sound, touch, taste, and smell when engaging in anthropological and ethnographic descriptions, most particularly descriptions of

***A future—as well as a vision— beyond  
the university is what today’s public  
intellectuals offer us.***

---

societies in which “the Eurocentric notions of text and textual practices are less important.”<sup>22</sup>

bell hooks also understands the importance of breaking down the mind/body dualism, not only in the production of scholarship, but in the way we approach pedagogy. She argues that the presence of the erotic in the classroom could enhance the learning experience. Eroticism, she explains, has not always been defined as strictly sexual, and to narrowly limit its definition to a sexual meaning prevents us from using its power as a means of self-actualization, as a way to give fully of ourselves to both learning and teaching.<sup>23</sup>

In our quest to divest the powers of the intellect from the weaknesses of the body, we have reduced the matters of everyday life—death, love, identity, emotions—to mere signifiers. To deconstruct this tendency, suggests Spellmeyer:

We will have to become ethnographers of *experience*: I do not mean armchair readers of the “social text,” but scholars/teachers who find out how people actually *feel*. And far from bringing English studies to a dismal close, the search for basic grammars of emotional life may give us the future that

we have never had, a future beyond the university.<sup>24</sup>

A future—as well as a vision—beyond the university is what today’s public intellectuals offer us. Giroux sees the role of the public intellectual/teacher as one that promotes “political education” rather than “politicizing education.” He notes:

Politicizing education perpetuates pedagogical terrorism, while a political education expands the pedagogical conditions for students to understand how power works on them, through them, and for them in the service of constructing and deepening their roles as critical citizens.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the public intellectual can transform the classroom from a site where knowledge is transmitted to one where knowledge is debated, engaged with, and produced interactively. Such a possibility, however, rests on the imperative that public intellectuals continually interrogate their own practices, and be self-critical of their authority and of how it influences classroom dynamics and relations.

As a teacher, I can apply some of these critical and self-critical techniques to weaken the power

structures that manifest themselves in my classroom and to negotiate my position of authority.

As an academic, I can begin to understand more clearly how those power structures work on me and influence the work that I produce out of this context.

Whether or not I can work my

way around them is another story. But there is no doubt that the navigational skills of public intellectuals can teach me valuable lessons. Perhaps the question—or the answer—lies in my ability to transform their theoretical propositions into practical applications. ■

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>See Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 121; and Adolph Reed, "The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual." *Village Voice*, 11 April 1995.
- <sup>2</sup>Henry Giroux, "Black, Bruised, and Read All Over: Public Intellectuals and the Politics of Race." *Class Issues: Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Public Sphere*, Ed. Amitava Kumar (New York: New York UP, 1997), 192.
- <sup>3</sup>Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
- <sup>4</sup>Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), 13.
- <sup>5</sup>Paul Smith, quoted in Jeffrey Di Leo and Christian Moraru. "Posttheory, Cultural Studies, and the Classroom." *Class Issues: Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Amitava Kumar (New York: New York UP: 1997), 238.
- <sup>6</sup>See Richard Ohmann, "On 'PC' and Related Matters." *PC Wars*, ed. Jeffrey Williams (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11; and Joan Scott Wallach, "The Campaign Against Political Correctness: What's Really at Stake" published in the same volume.
- <sup>7</sup>Charles Bernstein, "Thinking in Public: A Forum." *American Literary History* 10, no.1 (1998): 11.
- <sup>8</sup>Kurt Spellmeyer. "After Theory: From Textuality to Attunement with the World." *College English* 58, no. 8 (1996): 893.
- <sup>9</sup>This example is taken from Spellmeyer's "Travels to the Heart of the Forest," *College English* 56, no.7 (1994): 789.
- <sup>10</sup>Michael Bérubé. *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994), 164.
- <sup>11</sup>*ibid* 165-6.
- <sup>12</sup>Jeffrey Di Leo and Christian Moraru, 238.
- <sup>13</sup>Kurt Spellmeyer, "After Theory," 893.
- <sup>14</sup>*ibid* 896.
- <sup>15</sup>bell hooks is quoted in Bérubé, 155.
- <sup>16</sup>Michael Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1996)
- <sup>17</sup>Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 8.
- <sup>18</sup>Michael Dyson.
- <sup>19</sup>*ibid* 88-9.
- <sup>20</sup>*ibid* 89.
- <sup>21</sup>Richard Shusterman, "Rap Remix: Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and Other Issues in the House." *Critical Inquiry* 22, no.1 (1995): 152.
- <sup>22</sup>Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xii, xv.
- <sup>23</sup>bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 195.
- <sup>24</sup>See Spellmeyer's "After Theory," 911, and "Travels to the Heart of the Forest: Dilettantes, Professionals, and Knowledge." *College English* 56, no. 7 (1994): 788.
- <sup>25</sup>Henry Giroux, "Academics as Public Intellectuals." *Minnesota Review* 41 (1995): 315-6.27

**Works Cited**

- Bender, Thomas. *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.
- Bernstein, Charles, et al. "Thinking in Public: A Forum." *American Literary History* 10, no. 1 (1998): 1-83.
- Bérubé, Michael. *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics*. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Di Leo, Jeffrey R. and Christian Moraru. "Posttheory, Cultural Studies, and the Classroom." *Class Issues: Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Public Sphere*. Edited by Amitava Kumar. New York: New York UP, 1997.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1996.
- Fish, Stanley. *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Giroux, Henry. "Academics as Public Intellectuals." *Minnesota Review* 41 (1995): 310-23.
- - -. "Black, Bruised, and Read All Over: Public Intellectuals and the Politics of Race." *Class Issues: Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Public Sphere*. Edited by Amitava Kumar. New York: New York UP: 1997.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Jacoby, Russell. *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.
- Ohmann, Richard. "On 'PC' and Related Matters." *PC Wars*. Ed. Jeffrey Williams. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Reed, Adolph. "The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual." *Village Voice*, 11 April, 1995, 32-6.
- Spellmeyer, Kurt. "After Theory: From Textuality to Attunement with the World." *College English* 58, no. 8 (1996): 893-913.
- - -. "Travels to the Heart of the Forest: Dilettantes, Professionals, and Knowledge." *College English* 56, no. 7 (1994): 788-809.
- Shusterman, Richard. "Rap Remix: Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and Other Issues in the House." *Critical Inquiry* 22, no.1 (1995): 150-158.
- Stoller, Paul. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.
- Wallach Scott, Joan. "The Campaign Against Political Correctness: What's Really at Stake." *PC Wars*. Ed. Jeffrey Williams. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.