offered criticisms about the structure or timing of groups, alongside their reflections on how groups influenced them.


14. For example, a white woman who missed the meeting on race in her mixed group wrote: “I suppose I could have talked about the white guilt everyone tells me is not healthy to have but that I have anyway. I just don’t understand why I can go to Stanford while other people are starving.”

15. Editor’s note: In the late 1980s, Ms. magazine still included advertisements. The new Ms. does not.

An interesting thing often happens when people of color or queers speak up in class: everyone else feels silenced. I am tempted to define “everyone else” as most straight white people. In this case, however, race and sex categories are both over- and underinclusive. “Everyone else” really means People Lacking an Agenda (PLAs), people whose interest in race, class, and gender is grounded in something other than the need to survive in an alien culture and/or to assess in good faith their own position in the multiple systems of subordination that constitute the culture.

I have seen PLAs before. After a 1982 lecture by Barbara Smith at Yale’s Afro-American Cultural Center, PLAs shot their hands up to express how excluded they felt because Smith’s lecture, while broad in scope, clearly was addressed first and foremost to the women of color in the room. PLAs get sulky and petulant when traditionally marginalized people take the floor. What a remarkable sense of entitlement must drive their willingness to assert their experience of exclusion! If I wanted to raise my hand every time I felt excluded, I would have to glue my wrist to the top of my head. Yet in the few instances where a relatively multicultural environment should provide some respite—such as graduate-level class discussions revolving around race and gender—tensions inevitably soar as PLA anxiety surfaces.

Both classroom dynamics and broader theoretical concerns regarding communication among cultures must be examined to make fruitful the current trend toward an inclusive academy. It cannot be assumed, for example, that every participant in a diversely populated classroom is equally equipped to discuss race, gender, class, or sexual orientation on either a practical or a theoretical level. I would venture to say
that in classes where such discussions regularly arise, the balance of “equipment” tends to tilt away from inhabitants of the mainstream. Not because people of color or queers boast superior intellectual faculties, but because, as marginalized people, we know a lot more about our situation than do PLAs, and—for once—our situation is central to the discourse.

The role of critical theory deserves special attention when contemplating the confrontation between PLAs and the unsilent Other. As I will discuss later, an unguarded affinity for theory is often a presenting symptom of PLA anxiety. When I express concern over the inaccessibility of most critical theory, over what Barbara Christian describes as “the sheer ugliness of the language, its lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence constructions, its lack of pleasurable, its alienated quality,” academics usually justify its density and obfuscation as arising from the complicated nature of the issues it addresses. I will grant that race, class, gender, and queerness are complicated issues. However, I suspect that the complications arising as the academy begins to grapple with the epistemological dimensions of oppression are as emotional as they are intellectual. While these emotional complications are many and varied, I would like to focus on one dynamic that arose repeatedly during my recent sojourn in graduate school. I call it the Pocahontas Paradigm.

Peter Hulme observes that a major feature of the Pocahontas myth is the ideal of cultural harmony through romance. This ideal is systematically instilled in white North Americans through, among other things, the annual Thanksgiving Pageant. Year after year, a little white boy in a Pilgrim hat and buckled shoes clasps hands on stage with a girl in a leather dress with fringes. Little John Smith, who has ventured into uncharted territory populated by an unfamiliar Other, is rescued by a girl in braids whose spontaneous, unsolicited love transcends his foreignness and his whiteness and drives her to protect him from the more threatening elements among her own people.

No one seems particularly surprised that the sight of a white man under attack should awaken such a passion in Pocahontas; indeed, the myth of Pocahontas is concurrently the myth of John Smith’s entitlement to protection. When his psyche is at risk, when the clubs of an alien consciousness are poised and ready to put a dent in his head, Pocahontas is guaranteed to intervene. The crux of the Pocahontas Paradigm is the promise of aid and comfort from the Other: cultural and racial harmony are accomplished not because John Smith makes any effort to redefine his own position in a new and unknown world, but because Pocahontas volunteers to bridge the gap with love. Her love not only reconfirms his desirable superiority, but implicitly absolves him of guilt over the impending genocide of her people.

The saga of the first settlers is reenacted today as members of the academy set sail into the uncharted waters that lie beyond the dominant discourse. While excitement and intellectual stimulation mark the genuinely radical discovery of a world in which traditional structures of status and knowledge are dismantled, alarm and disorientation also set in when a comfortable sense of self, situated in a familiar landscape, dissolves beneath scholars’ feet. The world they are trepidately discovering is not, of course, uninhabited. The dominant discourse has never been home to people of color, queers, or those who combine racial and sexual otherness. As Angela Harris has written, “black women have had to learn to construct themselves in a society that denied them full selves.” Similarly, in order to claim an identity free of self-loathing, gay and lesbian people have created discursive strategies that reject and transform the categories produced by a hostile and hegemonic heterosexual discourse. Thus, my compass is calibrated by my need to speak, act, and love. My map charts the course for my survival.

People Lacking an Agenda also lack a map. As the direction of classroom discussions prompts meaningful participation by people whose experience lies outside the dominant discourse, as subordinated people generate a discourse which implicitly or explicitly critiques the established order of the classroom, PLAs begin to lose themselves, and the Pocahontas Paradigm erupts. I have heard complaints that the people of color in a certain class were trying to make everyone else feel guilty: “Can’t we move beyond our differences? Can’t we find some common ground? This is too depressing. Surely we can bridge the gap.” We must question, however, for whose comfort the common ground is to be laid. Cultural harmony on whose behalf, accomplished by whom? It is worth remembering that the groundbreaking collection of writings by radical women of color is titled This Bridge Called My Back.

Queers are also subject to the Pocahontas Paradigm. Overhearing a comment made to me about how homophobia got little attention in a class about the politics of subordination, a fellow student grabbed my arm, smiled brilliantly, and said, “Oh yes, you should definitely bring that up! I’m just dying to discuss my fear of lesbians with you!” However great her fear of me and my kind, her sense of entitlement to my attention apparently outweighed it. Another classmate told me
she felt too guilty to talk about oppression at all. Well, guilt is like that—paralyzing and immobilizing. As such, guilt is a convenient way to claim powerlessness in the face of responsibility. White people are responsible for racism, and benefit from it. Straight people are responsible for homophobia, and benefit from it. To take responsibility is to find your footing in the world outside the dominant discourse. To take responsibility is to acquire an agenda, and leave the legacy of John Smith behind.

Actually, the Pocahontas Paradigm is a relatively benign manifestation of PLA anxiety. The other PLA phenomenon I wish to address concerns theory, or rather, a certain attitude about theory. All theory, by its nature, stands at a distance from its subject. Postmodern discourse, with its extremely specialized vocabulary and its self-referential tendency toward criticism of criticism of criticism, turns this distance into a chasm. As a result, a purportedly progressive endeavor such as colonial-discourse theory—aimed, in the words of Edward Said, at ending “dominating, coercive systems of knowledge”—lacks a practical relationship to the masses of people whose lives and identities are directly burdened by these very systems. While this distance may indeed reflect the complexity of the critical task at hand, it also reinforces the academy’s stubborn refusal to confront the disorderly specificity of oppression as it operates in the world. If the Pocahontas Paradigm represents one response to the anxiety and disorientation produced when the Other speaks, the PLA’s uncritical and possessive approach to theory represents the correlating response: namely, a refusal to hear what the Other is actually saying.

In classrooms and at conferences where critical theory figures centrally, people who raise concerns regarding the alienation, exclusion, and inaccessibility produced by theory often are met with impatience, condescension, and contempt nearing brutality. The academy’s inexcusable complacency regarding the inaccessibility of theory is predicated on the assumption that people outside the academy, and especially subordinate peoples, have no significant relationship to the theoretical realm.

In fact, as bell hooks suggests, “theory is not an alien sphere” to the oppressed. First, as I have previously suggested, the development of an identity at odds with the dominant discourse requires and generates a high degree of creative abstract thought on the part of both individuals and groups. As Ntozake Shange has written, “bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma.” Second, communities that cannot rely on the state to regulate their internal conduct often develop alternative institutions and systems of knowledge in response to such predicaments as a unilaterally hostile police presence that protects no one or, in the case of gays and lesbians, the absence of state-sanctioned mechanisms for validating, formalizing, and regulating sexual and familial relationships.

In addition, communities engaged in struggles for liberation need access to theory. Contrary to the prevailing assumption that our cherished epistemological complexities need no popular dissemination, the systems of knowledge addressed by critical theory often have direct bearing on people’s lives. To give but one example, epistemic violence is more than a colorful phrase to thousands of gay and lesbian teenagers who commit suicide at three times the national average. The absolute hegemony of heterosexual discourse produces an understanding of same-sex desire that, to paraphrase Said, is governed not by empirical reality but by a battery of heterosexual desires, repressions, investments, and projections.

Internalized by the vulnerable adolescent mind, this vicious and dehumanizing system of ideas suffocates the healthy development of identity, leaving nothing but hopelessness in its wake. The gay and lesbian community’s need to understand the operation of this system in all its complexities speaks for itself.

The need for dialogue both within the classroom and with the outside world is, I hope, equally self-evident. Diversity and multiculturalism will mean very little unless we are willing to locate ourselves within the systems currently under deconstruction, and commit to examining and unmasking the mechanisms that perpetuate silence, distance, and epistemic violence at home and abroad.

Notes
6. Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 45.