

of the democratic project might, in contrast, encompass the extension, expansion, and continual reinvention of currently extant possibilities. It might invite and elaborate practices conducive precisely to “proliferating [the] multiplicity and complication” that Graff derides, because it would recognize what he calls “confusion” to be the condition, ends, and means of a more radically democratic commitment.

Graff is right, nonetheless, that some contexts call for reductive simplification, so I’ll give it a shot. If there is a secret to academic life, it is this queer one: intellectual inquiry leads to unexpected places. Outcomes assessment asserts the opposite. Built on prescription and predictability; quantification and comparison; standardization, transparency, and a reductive notion of democratic publics, outcomes assessment offers control and containment in place of open-ended exploration. It conditions students to accept the acquisition of discrete skills and pieces of information in place of genuine intellectual engagement. It relies on anti-queer, anti-intellectual presumptions and procedures to deny students the true key to the academic kingdom: the secret that our future is unknown, that research will reveal surprises, that difference offers a safeguard against narrow-mindedness, that incoherence is a condition of possibility, and that knowledge is neither finite nor fixed. In all these ways, and despite all Graff’s good intentions, outcomes assessment and standardization make higher education not more democratic but less.

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#### *Reply:*

1. Contrary to Kim Emery, I don’t “blame” the educational achievement gap on “the ‘extraordinary diversity of texts, ideas, subjects, intellectual perspectives and approaches’ now available on college campuses.” In the

essay she quotes, I *defend* this curricular diversity as decidedly “rich” (“Our Undemocratic Curriculum” 129), just as I’ve defended it against critics for decades as a sign of “the vast superiority of today’s university” relative to that of the 1950s (*Beyond the Culture Wars* 4). What I do blame is the failure to *connect* the elements of this admirably diverse curriculum and to give students enough help in making sense of it.

2. Emery turns my qualified defense of educational standardization into the absurd view that “each class in Victorian literature should be the same as every other,” like McDonald’s quarter-pounders. She also misrepresents me as a supporter of No Child Left Behind–style standardized testing, ignoring my plea to distinguish “between good and bad forms of standardization” and my reference to NCLB tests as examples of a bad form (134).

3. Emery accuses me of overestimating “the extent to which rhetorical proficiency—as opposed to, say, money and power—wins access to the forums in which influential arguments take place.” There’s no disputing that money and power often get you into those forums, but for those who don’t have either, rhetorical proficiency is critical.

4. This in fact is why I stress the need to teach the standard conventions of persuasive argument, a practice that Emery disastrously confuses with supporting the social status quo. Since this confusion is still common, a closer look at Emery’s logic is in order.

I do argue, as Emery puts it, that “access to a culture of argumentation constitutes a singularly critical measure” of democratic education and that education involves “internalizing the norms of the intellectual community.” But I dispute Emery’s assumption that privileging a common “argument culture” means rejecting difference, diversity, “complex, challenging, or unfamiliar concepts,” and “a queerer, more open understanding of the democratic project.”

On the contrary, far from repressing difference, the norms of argumentation Emery attacks enable difference to emerge and to be perceived *as difference*. This presumably explains why Emery herself operates within these shared norms in her own response: she summarizes views she disagrees with, draws out the logical implications of assumptions, adduces evidence for her claims, and makes other conventional moves.

I concede Emery’s point that I do sometimes write as if “the public” is a unitary entity, when in fact, as she rightly says, it contains “counter-public[s] or subculture[s].” Again, however, Emery can make this point only within a common metalanguage that enables her to compare divergent subcultural perspectives with dominant ones. Again her argument depends as much as mine on a shared discourse as “the appropriate arbiter of academic standards.”

In all this, Emery unwittingly illustrates the double bind that Donald Davidson has pointed out in a classic critique of theorists of radical difference like Benjamin Lee Whorf, T. S. Kuhn, and others. Davidson argues that difference already presupposes commonality, or, in his words, “different points of view make sense . . . only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them.” Thus “Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, ‘be calibrated,’ uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences. Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using—what else?—our post-revolutionary idiom” (184).

Though Emery believes that the current nonstandard use of *queer* somehow refutes me, it actually illustrates my point that otherness can become intelligible only within what Davidson calls a “common co-ordinate system,” which enables the traditional normative meaning of the word to be compared with the subversive one. A struggle currently rages between standard and transgressive usages of *queer*; but this struggle is played out within a shared argument culture even as it stretches that culture’s boundaries by opening up new possibilities of what can be said and heard in it. The point is that shared argumentative norms are not a unitary, static monolith that stifles change but are preconditions of change.

It follows that you can’t challenge “the norms of the intellectual community” effectively if you haven’t learned those norms. This in turn means that socializing students into the public argument culture is not in conflict with helping them become effective critics of that culture but a precondition of it. As Elaine Maimon observes, “Those who would keep students ignorant of the academic landscape in the name of helping them find their own rebellious voices do not understand much about guerilla warfare” (viii). Emery doesn’t urge that we “keep students ignorant” of the “norms of the intellectual community,” but her linking of those norms with retrograde politics suggests she sees no great need to offer students the kinds of rhetorical power that she herself takes for granted.

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## CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE DUAL REQUIREMENT OF READING

I am writing with regard to Jane Gallop’s paper “The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,” published in *Profession 2007*. Gallop premises her bleak outlook on literary studies on a conversation with a job candidate in English a few years back. The candidate’s remark on the necessity of archival work in order to get published struck Gallop as an ominous sign for the field’s future. When I was entering the job market in French studies, around the same time, I was just as troubled by a question raised in roughly a third of my MLA interviews: What is your view on the teaching of literature and history? Without hesitation, I replied that for me the two were linked; knowledge of a particular historical period could only enrich one’s understanding of that period’s literary and artistic expression, and vice versa. At the time I suspected that these interviewers were looking to hire a literary specialist, and I knew that my answer betrayed my cultural studies slant. Gallop’s paper confirms my suspicion, but it also points to a likely reason behind the question: that cultural studies has drawn literary specialists away from close reading in favor of literary history, making them “amateur” or “second-rate” cultural historians (183, 184).

In the light of Gallop’s paper, I would now answer the interviewers’ question thus: Close reading is a fundamental practice in my French studies classes. Before calling on my students to analyze a written work or film for its cultural significance or aesthetics, I have them analyze a passage or scene closely. I direct them to consider various elements, including language and voice, setting and narrative detail, the use of cross-cutting and time—in all, the different ways in which an author establishes a theme or characterization, entices the reader to enter the text, or repels the reader. I believe that Gallop and I are in agreement on these fundamental analytic skills in literary studies, and I share her view that “close reading may in fact be the best antidote we have to the timeless and the universal” (185). Close readings draw out the complexities of a text, and regular practice teaches students to read and to become independent critical thinkers.

I saw two general themes running through Gallop’s arguments: the arbitrariness of labeling practices in the academy and a reductionist ten-