Forum

Ability and the Human

To the Editor:

As many articles in the March 2009 issue of *PMLA* imply, the question of ability is central to any consideration of the human. For example, in "Human, All Too Human: 'Animal Studies' and the Humanities" (124.2 [2009]: 564–75), Cary Wolfe shows how the humanities transgresses its own limits and thereby shifts its locus and center. Insofar as this broad area of study is the appropriate venue for reflection on the discursive boundary of the human, it must erase that boundary.

In a culminating move that resonates with most pieces in the "Animal Studies" section, Wolfe turns to Jacques Derrida's thinking (in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*) about defining the human. Through Derrida, Wolfe addresses the human ability of "thought or language," but he focuses on the being or nature of ability itself, framing the turn to Derrida with Derrida's engagement of Jeremy Bentham's concern with the ability to suffer, an ability that Derrida calls "non-power at the heart of power" (Wolfe 570). Wolfe highlights a structure of ability involving inability—"passion" or "sufferance"—without which the ability of thought or language, or indeed ability as such, would not emerge. As it becomes difficult to identify what human ability is, the question of the human becomes one of ability and of whether ability is a product of the human or vice versa. For Derrida, and thus apparently for Wolfe (and possibly Bentham), ability—perhaps as the human—becomes its own other, that which suffers itself.

There is much here to work through that I can only gesture toward, concerning the being or nature of ability, its erasure or *différance*, its association with humanity or animality (or stoniness, which Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Sense of the World* considers in terms of access to being in the world [59]), and so on. I merely wish to note the value or

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power of the notion of ability for this discourse of boundaries (as power and nonpower are doubled, recursive, inevitably a matter of the ability of ability), as well as for approaches to social or political categories. Disability scholars have begun explicitly to develop this line of thought in opening up the disability (or, more properly, dis/ability) involved in any expression of ability; indeed, disability studies has been moving in this direction for decades. A forthcoming special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, titled *Disability and Rhetoric* (31.1 [2011]), promises to pursue this line, and Wolfe works with the ability-disability problematic in his recent book *What Is Posthumanism?* (U of Minnesota P, 2009). In short, the emergent emphasis on ability has great significance for the study of the human and of the products of humanity.

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The Radical-Teaching Debate

To the Editor:

Jacqueline E. Brady and Richard M. Ohmann rightly broadened the conversation in the Forum by justifying "teaching for social justice" (125.1 [2010]: 217–18). It takes wisdom like theirs to encapsulate years of theory into a case that views not informed by radical critique implicitly promote hegemonic values. Teachers who hold such views cannot lead useful debates.

Gerald Graff, whose 2008 Presidential Address prompted Brady and Ohmann's letter, needs to admit that in certain arenas "teaching the conflicts" stops making sense. Lawrence Summers lost his job as president of Harvard University in part because he still thinks the inherent scientific intelligence of women is debatable. In the academy, even if some scholars argue that slavery was an economically sound institution, we no longer debate its merit. Most well-informed people, like most scientists, think that the human impact on climate change would not make an interesting subject of debate. Would Graff approve of conducting a debate on the Bush torture memos? Much of what was "radical" in 1848, 1920, 1954, 1968, and 2004 is now mainstream. Teaching students to become radicals has simply led them to become early adopters of humane values that much of American society was blind to.

So what is left in 2010 to be shocked about in radicalism, or "critical thinking," and to cause Graff to complain that faculty members are influencing students politically in ways that "discredit" higher education? The main radical arguments today, I imagine, involve the failures of capitalism. Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman, Jerome Groopman and Atul Gawande, David Cole and dozens of others now expound these in the mainstream: the failures of our health care system, our prison-industrial complex, and our overseas wars and the long-term high unemployment and midlife job discrimination that will affect almost all young people, even graduates of elite universities. It is the classrooms that never mention such issues, I submit, that are "isolated" and "self-protective" and deserve a responsible educator's scorn.

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Reply:

Thanks to Margaret Morganroth Gullette for adding another historical dimension to the conversation that we have been having with Gerald Graff about radical teaching. Indeed, much of what was radical once is no longer so. It's hard to see why biologists today should back up 150 years and give creationism a fair shot in the classroom. Let them use their "power, experience, and control of academic discourse" (as Graff puts it in his reply to our letter) to teach evolutionary science. Graff's objection to our teaching critical and radical perspectives, even if "we are up-front about [our political] commitments and encourage our students to disagree with us," seems like an objection to college teaching in general, as commonly and quite properly done. Students take courses other than ours, few of them radical. Why not let students

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