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The House of Seminar Needs Overhaul

The General Education Seminar in Theory and Practice

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I don't believe you can learn by passive interaction with the material. Learning can only take place in the active examination of the materials you read next to your own living, let that form of interaction take place rather than functioning as a computer. I am not interested in human computers and I don't think you are either. It will be necessary for us to know each other and who we are as we look at this work.

— Audre Lorde, Black Women's Poetry Seminar, Freie Universität Berlin, Session 1, April 1984

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND SCOPE

I need to begin by thanking John Weinstein and the entire *Early College Folio* team at Bard College at Simon's Rock for making this possible and for generously granting me access to the Simon's Rock Archives. I especially want to thank Erin Donahue, who did much of the work of helping me locate relevant documents. Without her efforts, over and above what was necessary, this article would not exist.

This essay has its beginnings in my tenure as the Chair of Second-Year Seminar for the Bard Early College network. The origin of Second-Year Seminar at Simon's Rock as well as the accessible documentary record detailing the history of revisions to the course make it an ideal place to start tracing the history of Seminar at the Bard Early Colleges. However, this framework also imposes limitations. What follows will be primarily an intellectual and institutional history of the General Education Seminars at Simon's Rock which I revolve around a discussion of the genealogy and philosophy of Seminar more broadly. The benefits of this methodology are that one can approach the topic in an essay-length discourse and be attendant to what Seminar has been at Simon's Rock as well as what it has been elsewhere and, ultimately,

what it could be. The drawbacks are that I cannot hope to approach anything resembling a detailed social history of the General Education Seminars at Simon's Rock let alone across the Bard Early College network. It is my hope that more studies will follow this one. Today, the General Education Seminars are both varied and connected across the Bard Early Colleges, and there are many stories worth telling in greater detail, campus by campus, alongside the broader history of Bard Early College.

Finally, in the spirit of Seminar, I attempt to treat the subject in an interdisciplinary manner that considers history, philosophy, literature, theory, and whatever else feels pertinent. While parts of the essay certainly move forward from the past to the present, others make non-linear moves to the past, near and far, in order to bring out thematic resonances and, hopefully, spark conversation. While this essay is hardly the first round of this conversation, I hope it is a significant contribution to the discourse on the past, present, and future of Seminar.

TWO DIFFERENT SEMINARS

On November 15th, 1975, Angela Davis joined Claremont Colleges at the behest of the Claremont Black Studies Center. The backlash, especially from wealthy alumni and donors of the Claremont community, was entirely predictable. They were doubly disappointed when they received letters from the administration stating that while the appointment was “unauthorized and regrettable,” it could not be legally revoked.¹ Despite this, Davis's contract was, of course, revoked and, only under the advice of lawyers, ultimately reinstated. James Garrett, the director of the Black Studies Center who hired Davis, was fired as retribution. Davis, a member of the Communist Party USA, would be allowed to teach her seminar at Claremont, but only on Friday evenings and Saturdays when the campus was virtually empty. The 26 students who signed up for the class were “sworn to secrecy” and the dates of Davis's weekend appearances were kept from public knowledge.² The “dangerous” topic of Davis's two-semester seminar was “Black Women and the Development of the Black Community.” The first semester covered the history of Black women and the second focused on “the political and economic environments of Black women” and “their treatment as special targets of genocide, including sterilization, enforced birth control, and sexual experimentation.”³

In a 2021 interview, Davis, reflecting on her undergraduate and graduate studies, recounted a different series of seminars. When she was a senior at Brandeis, Davis reached out to Herbert Marcuse to help her gain a foothold in her ambitions to study continental philosophy. In the first quarter, Davis met in Marcuse's office to read and discuss the Pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Schopenhauer, and Locke. After that, she agreed, with some trepidation, to enroll in Marcuse's seminar on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁴ Davis

remembers being filled with doubts. “How could I possibly participate in a class with graduate students who had probably been studying philosophy for many years?”⁵ Rather than backing away, however, Davis “overcame my fear, took the seminar, and Marcuse called upon me to give the first paper of the seminar.” Davis found in these seminars with Marcuse “a philosophy applied in an interdisciplinary context as it might assist in the process of changing the world.”⁶

Whatever tension exists between these two seminars, one focused exclusively on Black women and another on continental philosophy, Davis thrived on it. Indeed, she once claimed, “I see this as a feminist stance. The capacity to dwell within contradictions and render them productive is an important element of feminist methodologies.”⁷ Davis similarly explains her decision to join the Communist Party USA as a navigation of the idea, then stated by Stokely Carmichael, that communism was a “white man’s thing” and irrelevant to Black liberation.⁸ “While I was passionate about Black liberation,” she recounts, “I’ve always sought a commitment that embodied interrelations and connections. I can remember, even when I was growing up in Birmingham, that although white people were certainly racist, we had to be able to reach them because workers’ struggles were important.”⁹ “Difference,” Davis argued, citing Audre Lorde, “must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.” The goal is not to pick one pole or the other, but to thrive in the space between. Davis could have further cited Lorde on the subject of difference: “You won’t find bridges until you recognize difference, plumb difference, and examine the feelings that go with it—you might find feelings you share. This process won’t work if you are searching for an easy connection through similarities.”¹⁰

“THE HOUSE OF EDUCATION NEEDS OVERHAUL”

Simon’s Rock opened in 1966 as a school, at the time called neither a high school nor a college, for high school-aged girls who were ready for the challenges of college at an earlier age than their peers. In a seminal essay, “The House of Education Needs Overhaul,” Simon’s Rock’s founder, Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, made it clear that Simon’s Rock was going to be focused on innovation and non-traditional pedagogy. As she sought to hire the founding faculty, Hall lamented how “99 conventional minds with conventional text-book in hand” replied to every job posting, but nevertheless she insisted that Simon’s Rock serve the needs of diverse learners. Hall was especially focused on educating young people who were still searching for “practicable ideas for themselves and the world they live in,” even if those ideas were not “saleable” or directly translatable to economic benefits.¹¹ For Hall, the prevailing model of education in the mid-1960s was an exercise in competitive stair climbing, which was largely to blame for the nihilism and alienation that she perceived as culminating in a generation of young people who had dropped out and no longer trusted anyone over the age of 30.¹² Especially galling to Hall was the notion that young people were too headstrong and proud, that they

possessed “powers of execution in excess of their judgment.”¹³ As Francesca Gamber has pointed out, Hall’s essay can be read as a warning to a society so afraid of its children that it preferred to silence them and “lock the young adult in restriction” rather than summon the courage necessary to listen to them.¹⁴

In opposition to these trends, Hall proposed a place with interdisciplinary, humanistic inquiry as its bedrock, a place where “powerful, headstrong young people” could ask deep questions and read powerful texts that have reverberated over centuries while learning to take personal responsibility for themselves with the guidance of caring adults.¹⁵ For Hall, a liberal education is one that “liberates the student” to “free her mind” through humanistic inquiry that examines and challenges preconceived assumptions, investigates the self and the wider world, and critically examines shared and created heritage.¹⁶

Hall’s thoughts on education, found in “The House of Education Needs Overhaul” and subsequent writings, are a dialectical engagement with modernity. On one hand, Hall loathed certain elements of modern America, particularly the nihilism that she saw emerging from a generation of children raised by mass media and entertained into complacency.¹⁷ On the other hand, Hall lamented the incomplete modernization of American education. While the architectural metaphor of the “house” of education has often gone unremarked, Hall was quite clear in using it. Modernity had transformed the entire American landscape and virtually every American structure, but not the “house” of education, she argued. The gleaming skyscrapers of the American metropolis are the most obvious examples of American modernity, but Hall was too complicated to have lauded their phallic, garish dominance of the American skyline that reduced the human to the relative stature of an ant scurrying about at ground level.¹⁸ To see what modernity meant to Hall, a better place to look would be her description of the landscape of Great Barrington. Indeed, Hall’s understanding of the modern character of Simon’s Rock shared far more with Frank Lloyd Wright’s conception of “Organic Architecture,” a structure that marries nature and human culture harmoniously, rather than the striking modernity of steel and glass in the American city.¹⁹

Nowhere is this more evident than in the naming of Simon’s Rock for a glacial erratic. The boulder, alien to the land around it, was left behind by a glacier on the move as the most recent Ice Age came to a close more than 11,000 years ago. Hall referenced this stony migrant in the very first catalog for the institution, citing the local neighborhood children who built a cabin alongside the rock in the 1920s. Hall described the rock as a liminal space, which all spaces of education are. Where the children gathered at the rock, a seemingly immovable boulder which may have traveled more of the world than some of the humans who lived in the area, they could glimpse the world of adults in the valley below as the realization slowly set in that they shared more with those adults than they sometimes cared to admit. Her descriptions of Simon’s Rock often played on notions of organic growth alongside a modernizing Great Barrington, simultaneously resembling the prevailing understandings of nature, culture, and

industry: an institution “properly called neither ‘school’ nor ‘college.’” The early college at Simon’s Rock, Hall stated prophetically, would come to “embody in its teachings the same lessons that were learned at the rock by the builders of that first cabin.”²⁰ For Hall, as for Frank Lloyd Wright, the goal was to consider the totality as a meaningful whole composed of a unity that is both artistic and liveable. “One great thing instead of a quarreling collection of so many little things,” even if some might see this as contradictory or riddled with tensions.²¹ As Frances Kendall will point out 40 years after Simon’s Rock was founded, the early college is, and must be, inextricably linked to American society and all its ideological, cultural, spiritual, and material currents.²²

THE ROOTS OF SEMINAR

*se-: Proto-Indo-European root meaning “to sow” from which we get *disseminate*, *inseminate*, *seed*, *semen*, *seminal*, *seminary*, *semination*, *season*, and, of course, *seminar*.²³ This etymology raises a question: what do we mean when we say “Seminar?” A dissemination? The seed of Socrates or something more insidious? In fact, many of the derivations of *se- that connect it to education are of early modern origin. It is in this genealogy, as much as in the gymnasia of Socrates’s Athens, that we might begin to understand the roots of our Seminar and, having discovered its seed bed, perhaps begin to imagine its future.

In the 14th century, the derivatives of *se- were closely connected to agriculture and reproduction, through seed and semen, rather than education. *Semen*: “seed of plants, animals, or men; race, inborn characteristic, posterity, progeny, and offspring . . . origin, essence, principle, cause.”²⁴ The Latin *seminarium*, in the 1400s, referenced not a school, but a seed bed, plant nursery, or breeding ground. In the medieval period, then, *se- and its derivatives, *seed*, *semen*, and *seminarium*, were increasingly associated with the reproduction of flora and fauna, including human fauna. The clustering of these words around the concepts of origins, essences, and the chain of causation strongly echoes Aquinas’s scholastic search for God as the unmoved first mover and, hence, the origin of all causality.²⁵

It is only in the early modern period, from the 16th to the 18th century, that *se- and its derivatives cluster around a new set of meanings. The evolution of *seminary* from a seed bed into a school in the mid-16th century is one example, but so is the shifting sense of *seminal* from “of seed or semen” to “full of possibilities” in the 1630s. By the 17th century, *disseminate* is still connected to plant and propagation through *seed* and *semen*, but it has also begun to attach itself to a more expansive meaning: “to spread abroad” and “in every direction.” *Inseminate*, too, while today associated with pregnancy and semen, meant “to cast as seed” in the 1620s and would not be used to describe human reproduction until the 1800s.²⁶ These shifts are unsurprising given the European exploration and colonization of the globe that begins in the 15th century. Indeed,

it's not incorrect to say that there has always been a colonial side to Seminar, as there has been to all formal education. There is also, however, another side of *se-, as full of possibility and concerned with growth in every direction and regardless of parentage, which I suspect is the main reason educators have done and continue to do what they do.

Although it is commonplace to attribute the origins of Seminar to Socratic dialogue, a more proximate and ultimately more decisive influence is the transformation that occurred, in parallel to etymological changes, in the early modern German universities, specifically, in the institutes for classical philology founded between 1738 and 1838.²⁷ Philology departments were cobbled together from three distinct models: 1) the disputational, Socratic model of Germany's private collegia, 2) the social and intellectual discipline as well as the focus on Latin of the pedagogical seminaries, and 3) the focus on the written word of the German private societies.²⁸ By the early 19th century, these seminars in philology and pedagogy began to free themselves from state control as authority shifted to seminar directors who had leeway to prescribe any texts or topics they saw fit. Curricula always revolved around oral disputation, the reading and writing of Greek and Latin "classics," and critique, interpretation, and teaching.²⁹ The traditional focus on Greek and Latin texts, married with what Clark calls the new "Humanistic Gymnasium" of the 19th century, created an elite coterie of humanities teachers who were expected to produce novel readings of classic texts that were unique to each individual scholar without straying too far from the established norms of the philology institute or explicitly critiquing the German state.³⁰ Seminarists were expected to develop their own unique research agendas and spheres of academic interest which, along with their differing commitments to punctuality and productivity, would enforce the differentiation of the seminarists and, thus, their rankin.³¹ The manner of research shifted as well, away from general theory and broad surveys of accumulated corpuses to the intensive, close reading of texts—even down to the study of the subtle meanings and origins of a single word—that gave birth to the first source-referenced etymological dictionaries. Finally, the new seminarist proved themselves not through oral disputation, but written dissertation, as the written essay overtook Socratic dialogue as the best proof of scholarly mastery.

Do the origins and etymology of Seminar matter anymore? At least one major thinker of the past century thought so. In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said calls philology the least modern, least sexy, and seemingly least relevant of the academic branches of learning. Immediately after this admission, he calls for a return to philology.³² The irrelevance of philology, he claims, has more to do with its adherents, who insist on an irrevocable attachment of philology to the notion of "Western Civilization" rather than its true meaning: the love and study of words and language that leads to self-discovery and self-invention. This meaning of philology, he reminds us, can be found in "all of the major cultural traditions;" it has one commandment (and many corollaries) that echoes across these traditions: submit yourself to language.

Pay close attention to the way it shapes our reality. Read. Read again until you can see yourself in the text and the text in yourself. Commit yourself to personal rebirth. Embrace the aesthetics of language and their opposition to “the depredations of daily life.”³³ Resist the drudgery of late capitalism and its anti-intellectualism. Reimagine a humanism that is in opposition to colonialism and rapacious greed. Read as a form of resistance.³⁴

A “PLANETARY CURRICULUM”

Edward Said and Achille Mbembe, in addition to being fierce critics of colonialism, have both argued that a new, truly planetary curriculum is needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century.³⁵ Both imagine their curriculum to be planetary in scale rather than reifying essentialisms about the uniqueness of a so-called “Western Civilization” because historical developments including the exploration of the globe, the Atlantic Slave trade, colonialism, “globalization,” climate change, and the attendant movement of human beings around the world that followed these developments, have made it imperative. For Mbembe, this is a practical matter that responds to the urgency of the challenges of the 21st century including climate change, resurgent fascism around the globe, and the persistent legacy of colonialism, all of which have rendered the lives of the world’s most vulnerable, in Mbembe’s words, “superfluous.”³⁶ They are not alone in this argument. Paul Gilroy, for example, has also argued that “multicultural ethics and politics could be premised on an agonistic, planetary humanism capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit on each other”³⁷ And yet, Mbembe, Said, Gilroy and others, despite being clear-eyed about the ongoing impact of what W. E. B. Du Bois used to call the “Color Line,” insist that only through a planetary politics—one that imagines all people coming together to create a world in common—do we have any hope of a better future. Additionally, they all believe that it is through education that we might begin to build such a world in common.

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, written at the end of Said’s life and published posthumously, Said outlines what such a planetary curriculum might consist of, shorn of “uncritical assumptions about ‘great books.’”³⁸ Rather than suggesting that the humanities be thrown out with the bathwater in response to criticisms of its historical failures, Said warns against “easy equations between ‘our’ tradition, ‘the humanities,’ and ‘the greatest works.’”³⁹ Instead, Said posits that in the future, the humanities, if they will be anything, will be conceived of as an ongoing practice continually open to revision and reinterpretation rather than an “austere club with rules that keep most people out and, when some are allowed in, a set of regulations disallowing anything that might expand the club’s membership”⁴⁰ In other words, Said warns against a humanistic tradition that pretends to universal significance even while imposing a kind of rigid, intellectual colonialism that keeps most of the world’s population at arm’s length. “When will we stop allowing

ourselves to think of humanism as a form of smugness,” he asks, “and not as an unsettling adventure in difference, in alternative traditions, in texts that need a new deciphering within a much wider context than has hitherto been given them?”⁴¹ Mbembe makes much the same point when he argues, “I am talking about expanding the archive, not excising it. For this to happen, it must be clear to all that the European archive alone can no longer account for the complexities, both of history, of the present, and of the future of our human and other-than-human world.”⁴² Indeed, Said sees no contradiction between humanism and democratic participation in, and criticism of, the humanistic project.⁴³ Attacking the abuses of humanism is not the same thing as attacking the humanist core itself even if humanism forever remains incomplete, disputable, and provisional.⁴⁴

The devil, of course, is always in the details, and discussing a planetary curriculum in the abstract still leaves open the question of what might be included in one; but Said and Mbembe leave some hints as to what its canon might comprise. The first hint is Said’s understanding of “canon” not in the Arabic sense (*qanun*) as a rigid, legalistic system, but in a musical one where a canon is “a contrapuntal form employing numerous voices” imitating each other but free to express a range of emotions.⁴⁵ This is precisely what Mbembe calls for when he suggests “reading the different archives of the world critically, each with and against the others.”⁴⁶ Mbembe states:

I feel sorry for any young person who might go through the . . . educational system without ever . . . having read any African, Indian or Chinese novels or poetry, or without having studied any African, Japanese or Chinese thinker of note The purpose of a planetary curriculum would be to cure our souls from such human-inflicted ills . . . It has to do with bringing as equitably as possible everybody, every person and every text, every archive and every memory in the sphere of care and concern.⁴⁷

Neither Said nor Mbembe, however, are advocating for an inverse canonization in which historically repressed texts become the new orthodoxy to be canonized. Mbembe warns:

The same pathos is to be found in most debates on curriculum reform, on what we must or must not read and . . . how to reconfigure or redesign the archive. Although fought in the name of equality and justice, some of these mobilisations might end up reenacting a sectarian logic of enclosure, underpinned as they are by flawed notions of identity, gender or culture as spaces of protection and immunity, as borders which allow for a closing off from ‘those who are not as radical as us.’⁴⁸

Humanistic curricula, Mbembe adds, are not meant to be refuges for students any more than they are meant to be refuges for professors, nor can they

guarantee anyone “a stable identity, protection, safety and security and eventually immunity to an embattled self.”⁴⁹

To paraphrase Cornel West, the goal of reading widely is to demystify texts, from Shakespeare to Spike Lee, without becoming reductionist critics of or devotees to the cult of “Western Civilization.”⁵⁰ Or we could consider James Baldwin who, in his youth, condemned Shakespeare as a chauvinist and an architect of his oppression. Later in life, Baldwin was prompted to reevaluate Shakespeare, not because he is a paragon of some “Western Civilization,” but because he found in Shakespeare a humanism that is responsible to all people.⁵¹ Or, perhaps, Ta-Nehisi Coates put it best by citing Ralph Wiley’s answer to Saul Bellow’s racist taunt, “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?” with “Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus” because he was human and thus he belongs to all.⁵² “*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.*”⁵³ Coates, not incidentally, first decided he wanted to be a writer while reading Macbeth which struck him because of the poetry of the text and the idea “of being so wounded by the world that you didn’t care what you did anymore.” Despite the often fractious nature of debates over curriculum, there are, among authors like Coates, West, Mbembe, Said, Lorde, Davis, and Du Bois (among others), at least a few points of convergence. Possibly the most significant one is that learning must always involve a challenging experience with difference and that no one should be immune to undergoing this challenge.

THE CRISIS AND THE LIMITS OF DIFFERENCE

Frantz Fanon arrived at Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in 1953. The patients, divided into two wards, one for European women and one for Algerian men, had been transferred by a frontline hospital that had failed to help them. They were considered incurable. Fanon soon found out that social therapy significantly helped the European women and seemed to have almost no impact on the Algerian men.⁵⁴ The reason for this discrepancy was that the cognitive work required of the patients, to re-learn how to impart meaning onto the world through socialization, could not take place if the cultural frame of reference was entirely alien to the patients. The European women found the film club, the music society, and the hospital journal to be familiar enough that they could begin to weave it into their self and collective narratives. The Algerian men, by contrast, found the cultural frame of their social therapy to be so alien that they pulled away from meaningful engagement with it. So long as the Algerian patients felt themselves to be in the grasp of a hostile medical institution that severely limited their autonomy, itself nestled in the colonial framework which had stifled them outside of the institution, any acknowledgement of the doctor’s program would be tantamount to acknowledging the right of the colonial apparatus to exert power over them.⁵⁵ Fanon turned to his Algerian staff to come up with more culturally appropriate methods of re-socializing the patients. A “Moorish Cafe” was opened, familiar cultural festivals were celebrated with local storytellers and musicians, and the patients built a

football pitch on the hospital grounds.⁵⁶ These cultural touch points did not, and indeed could not, mean that the work ahead of Fanon's Algerian patients would be any less difficult. It was the opening of a door,⁵⁷ no meager feat in a colonial context.

Our students are not our patients nor are they as culturally alienated as the Algerian men for whom Fanon was charged with caring, but more than a few of them believe school to be a form of control, imposed upon them by powers that will never answer to them, and structured fundamentally oppositional to their understanding of their life goals. It is in this sense that Fanon's insights are crucial because they point us to the limits of difference in the classroom and the curriculum. Fanon understood the human subject as "open to the world" and to interaction with the Other, but he also had an intimate understanding of how the colonized person was obliged to close themselves off as a means of self-preservation. The colonial subject, who has been constantly obliged to bow and scrape, to internalize a negative self-assessment by constantly seeing oneself through the eyes of others, and to dull one's capacity to suffer in response to overwhelming suffering, has had to erect a series of defenses in order to preserve their psyche and, sometimes, just to survive.⁵⁸ The omnipresent need for the maintenance of these defenses can exact a heavy toll.

In an essay that has thus far lauded the necessity of challenging students to engage with difference, it is all the more important to acknowledge the limitations of this approach, particularly with students who have been traumatized by the realities of life in the United States, both inside and outside of the classroom's walls. Yes, any student can find meaning in Plato's *Republic*, but if Seminar is seen as both too alien to be approached meaningfully and as a cog in the same colonial apparatus that has plagued our students their entire lives, any opportunity to engage them in meaningful, humanistic inquiry will fail the majority of the class. Not everyone is or can be Audre Lorde or Angela Davis, and our goal needs to be much more expansive and ambitious than nurturing the "talented tenth" who are capable, like W. E. B. Du Bois, of sublimating the ugliness of the United States, or like Davis, of thriving in a Seminar on Kant.

In fact, Paul Gilroy argues that no one other than Du Bois can help us to imagine how the demands of both difference and culturally responsive pedagogy and curricula can be balanced.⁵⁹ Gilroy finds in Du Bois, born in Great Barrington a stone's throw from Simon's Rock, a model of what he terms the "cosmopolitan imagination" that invites all to be a "coworker in the kingdom of culture" by balancing a number of concerns necessary to consider what true humanism might look like: attending to the consequences of racism as well as confronting an international order bent on enforcing the "color line" while also reading Greek mythology and the "sorrow songs" together on the basis that they both belong in the planetary archive and we have much to learn from them.⁶⁰ Shana Russell, also focusing on Du Bois, has argued that it is in *The Crisis*, the journal Du Bois founded in 1910 and edited until 1934, that we might find the most potent example of his decades-long engagement with the intersection of

humanism and the color line. In *The Crisis*, Russell sees an “archive of black life . . . unmitigated by the white gaze,” unbound from the confines of traditional disciplinarity and, perhaps most shockingly, available to download for free to this day.⁶¹ Most importantly, Russell leaves us with the following:

I believe that no matter what I am reading or researching or writing, from Toni Morrison to Friedrich Nietzsche, there is a place for me somewhere. It is also something I teach my students at [Bard High School Early College] Newark . . . I don’t believe that a mere inclusion of texts by authors of color will make any kind of intervention if we don’t change our pedagogy to make room for our students to, borrowing from Du Bois again, take themselves in hand and master themselves. My students may not choose the path that I have chosen. But they will choose sides and know that they belong any and everywhere they decide they want to be.⁶²

Du Bois challenges us not only to look away from the maelstrom of colonial violence and exploitation that still has so many of our students in its grasp, but he also demands that we imagine the better future they will build. “You may bury me in the East, You may bury me in the West” is only fatalism if one forgets the rejoinder,

But I’ll hear the trumpet sound in that morning . . .

Trumpet sound the world around,
Trumpet sound for rich and poor,
Trumpet sound for Jubilee,
Trumpet sound for you and me.⁶³

AN IDEAL CURRICULUM

In the mid-to-late 19th-century United States, the demands of an industrializing society and a growing population led to the emergence of business schools, vocational and nursing programs, agricultural and technical programs at land grant colleges created by the Morrill Act of 1862, and state normal schools for aspiring educators. These new initiatives diverged sharply from the historical mission of American higher education, which was conceived as a liberal education in arts and letters. It was not long after this modernization of higher education that we see the beginnings of Seminar develop in the traditional American academy as a means of supporting students as they navigated the landscape of the academy. In order to do this, colleges and universities first moved to create advisory systems. In 1877 Johns Hopkins pioneered the creation of faculty advisers and in 1889 Harvard appointed a board of freshman advisers.⁶⁴ Both were a response to the general sentiment that the college students of the day were not adequately prepared to navigate the university. The creation of the First-Year Seminar followed after to reinforce the advisory

systems. General Education Seminars in the United States emerged as required courses at the advent of the 20th century at Boston University, the University of Michigan, and Oberlin College, though they did not grant college credits. The first credit-bearing, required First-Year Seminar was “The College Life Course” at Reed College in 1911. The course, however, focused only on topics germane to the history of college education and curricula as well as guidance to students about residence life and their academic plans. By 1921, 41 American colleges and universities offered a First-Year Seminar. The number rose to 79 by 1925 and, at the height of its popularity, 43% of American institutions of higher education had a First-Year Seminar in place. The Seminar boom, however, collapsed between the mid-20th century and the 1960s when seminars were “all but extinct” due to the industrial and economic advances of the post-war period.⁶⁵

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, spurred by a wave of baby boomers and previously excluded students, including racially diverse and low-income students, that we see a resurgence of Seminar and the ideals of a liberal, general education. In the 1960s, many of the elite American colleges began to experiment with “comprehensive” general humanities courses as a part of a “common core” that all students were required to take; and, in the 1970s, beginning with the University of South Carolina, First-Year Seminar began to make a comeback.⁶⁶ The overwhelming concern of most institutions, as it was at the turn of the century, was “a desire to make sure new students were fit for the university” rather than contemplating the possibility that the university might need to change to accommodate the new students.⁶⁷

Given the earlier trend towards the elimination of common courses, it is all the more noteworthy that in 1952 Heinrich Blücher, husband to Hannah Arendt and then a visiting professor at Bard College, suggested that Bard create a common course aimed at “everybody, every free personality, every single field of creative endeavor.”⁶⁸ Blücher’s outline is all the more impressive in that he called for the equality of professors and students in the common task of learning and seeking truth, even if the professor might be a more “experienced collaborator.” This was a resistance to all forms of totalitarianism and a warning against a “snobbish” revival of classical education by focussing on a “hundred great books.”⁶⁹ For Blücher, the professor should be in the thick of things alongside the students, grappling with the paradoxes of the modern world and how people might emerge from an education without becoming “mere agents of power, mere efficient contractors of energy, mere exponents of a will unknown to us.”⁷⁰ Among other things, Blücher argued that students should be challenged to build community, accept “strangers as coworkers,” accept individuals as members of society, question who made it possible for them to attend college and where the money came from, cultivate their creative capacity more than their efficiency, question all of their relationships to the human and natural world, and, above all, to avoid authoritative and authoritarian answers.⁷¹

Simon's Rock was founded right in the middle of these changing educational currents as well as the broader social and political tumult of the 1960s that Hall alluded to in "The House of Education Needs Overhaul." Despite whatever one thinks about the '60s, however, there was a palpable optimism and a will to imagine a better future.⁷² Unsurprisingly, as the optimistic imaginings of the 1960s soured post 1974,⁷³ so did the mood at Simon's Rock. By the mid-1970s students were actively voicing their dissatisfaction with Simon's Rock. At the core of their complaints was the feeling that their voices were not being heard, that they did not have input into the curricula, that the existing program of study was arbitrary, and that the institution was failing to live up Hall's mission to create a place for open inquiry and experimentation.⁷⁴ By 1977, the alienation of the student body from the early college had only gotten worse and President Magill convened a special meeting of the faculty and administration to discuss the low morale, declining grades, and increase in the number of students transferring out before finishing their programs. Magill met with groups of students to hear their perspectives on the culture of the campus, further sought student input through the Community Council, called for greater parental involvement in student affairs, and met with the Judicial Committee to discuss a more "even administration of justice" which students had cited as being inconsistent and a major factor in their low morale and discussions about transferring out.⁷⁵ One of the reforms meant to address students transferring out in their senior year was to create an interdisciplinary Senior Seminar as a graduation requirement alongside a comprehensive exam and a senior thesis which would make the year more meaningful. On April 24, 1978, a memorandum called for a Senior Seminar worth three to six credits, depending on the course and its requirements. The students expressed a strong desire for the Senior Seminar to be interdisciplinary, but the Academic Senate wanted a "cohesive" experience where all students took Seminar within their major disciplines. The plan was to offer the course every other year and have both juniors and seniors enroll at the same time, but Senior Seminar as a separate graduation requirement lasted less than a year as did the comprehensive exams. Both were abolished on December 5, 1978, though the senior thesis requirement remained.⁷⁶

Major changes came swiftly after Bard acquired Simon's Rock in 1979. In 1980, Bard College President Leon Botstein called for a major overhaul of the general education curriculum. The goal would be a creation of an "ideal curriculum" grounded in liberal, humanistic inquiry.⁷⁷ Alternatively called "Interdisciplinary Seminar" and "New Student Seminar," the first general education seminar at Simon's Rock would adopt a historical perspective and anthropological approach to examining a series of binaries: individual and society, self and world, autonomy and community. It was also meant to introduce students to the various academic disciplines, their methods, and their relationships to each other in addition to engaging students in interdisciplinary readings of texts.⁷⁸ The idea behind the new curriculum was to avoid the restaurant menu experience of education in which students picked a little from column A, a little from column B, and so on without any kind of unifying, common experience.⁷⁹

President Botstein also called for a curriculum which would help students to engage with the complexity, chaos, and fragmentation of modern life without the expectation that, through studying it, they might abolish it. Finally, he called for a faculty-driven process of curricular revision in which Simon's Rock faculty, perhaps with a small number of outside experts in curricular reform, would be the driving force behind the new general education curriculum at Simon's Rock.⁸⁰

Botstein's letter was circulated on March 10, 1980 and on March 11, the Academic Senate promised to address "the issue of general education" within the New Student Seminar through the incorporation of a common cultural and historical background, a focus on developing academic skills, and discussions of the aims of a liberal arts education in addition to issues of residence life on campus.⁸¹ By May of 1980 there was also talk of the possibility of developing a Sophomore Seminar, though the discussion was tabled as the faculty had already left for their summer break and could not contribute their perspectives to the discussion.⁸² After faculty returned and discussions resumed, changes began taking place at an accelerated pace. It is clear that President Botstein was a driving force behind this urgency and that he did not want to replicate what he saw as the deficient models of Seminar being run at Princeton, which lacked cohesion, or the Columbia model, which he felt to be inappropriate for an early college because it expected far too much background knowledge to work with younger learners.⁸³ Interim evaluations in 1980 established that students opposed the new Seminar sequence, but felt the content to be important. The Academic Senate concluded, probably correctly, that what students wanted was to have more of a voice in the changes coming their way or, at the very least, to be able to provide meaningful feedback on the proposed revisions.⁸⁴

A three-semester Seminar arc, which has endured for much of Simon's Rock's history, first began in 1981-82. Historical Seminar came first in September 1981 and was followed by Cultural Perspectives Seminar in the Winter and Spring of 1982 and Moral Perspectives Seminar which began in the Fall of 1982 before moving permanently to the Winter and Spring in subsequent semesters. The Cultural Perspectives Seminars allowed students to choose from several courses offered by departments, fulfilling general education requirements that fit their interests. The first Cultural Perspectives Seminars were World Music, French Literature, Communist China, Native American Ethnology, and A General Introduction to Africa. In the second year, World Music was dropped and Native American Ethnology was rebranded as Native Peoples of the Americas. Male and Female: The Anthropology of Gender was added as were Nature in Chinese Art and Literature as well as Nature in Japanese Art and Literature. In subsequent years there would be further rebrandings; some courses would be dropped, and new additions would include Introduction to Asian Art and Culture, Tradition and Change in Asian Music Cultures, Middle East Politics and Culture, Perspectives on Women's Studies, Introduction to Anthropology, Art and Culture of China, Art and Culture of Japan, and Music Cultures of the

World.⁸⁵ By the end of 1986, however, the Cultural and Moral Perspectives Seminars disappeared as distinct general education requirements. The courses that had counted for the Cultural Seminar general education requirement were absorbed into their respective disciplines while remaining an AA requirement still called Cultural Perspectives.⁸⁶

Freshman Seminar was originally referred to as the Historical Seminar before being retitled The Age of Revolution. It included foundational texts that inspired and were produced by the American Revolution, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and works by Adam Smith, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill and Charles Darwin.⁸⁷ This formulation of Seminar did not last long, and by 1986 it had been revised and retitled The Examined Life. The new curriculum featured several of Plato's Socratic dialogues, Sophocles' *Oedipus Cycle*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, and select works of Darwin.⁸⁸ This version of Freshman Seminar proved to be very durable, as it ran, with some additions and subtractions here and there, to the year 2000.

The title of longest running Seminar course goes to Sophomore Seminar: Voices Against the Chorus, which debuted in 1986 to take the place of the Moral Perspectives Seminar and survived well into the 2000s. This course was also brought to Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) Manhattan in 2001 by Patricia Sharpe and disseminated to BHSEC Queens and Newark thereafter, where I encountered it in 2013. It continues to remain extremely influential at many of the BHSECs, though there have also been substantial revisions over the years. The original title was actually Rethinking Western Civilization: Voices Against the Chorus and the stated goal was to focus on thinkers who transgressed categories and upset the obvious order of things including questioning biblical literalism, white supremacy, libertarian economic theory, rational actor theory, and rationality itself.⁸⁹ Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin remained on the reading list and were joined by Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism*, W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

In the early 2000s there also was a flourishing of experimentation with the First Year Seminar syllabus. In 1999, Chris Coggins included the *Katha Upanishad* and early Buddhist scriptures in the reading list. Anne O'Dwyer's syllabus, representative of many Seminar II syllabi in the early 2000s, incorporated readings on sex and sexuality as well as race and slavery into Freshman Seminar II, including authors ranging from Catharine MacKinnon, Michel Foucault, Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Harriet Jacobs, and Mary Wollstonecraft, among others.⁹⁰ Also in 2000, Patricia Sharpe incorporated new texts into Freshman Seminar I including a strong focus on postmodern thought as evidenced by the inclusion of Roland Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges, Susan Sontag, Addison Gayle Jr., Deleuze and Guattari, and Salman Rushdie as well as older texts such as the *Katha Upanishad* and the

Analects of Confucius.⁹¹ By the late 2000s, however, much of this experimentation had been removed from Seminar I and II, though faculty-initiated efforts to revise general education at Simon's Rock resulted in a more diverse Seminar III course.

Following a faculty retreat in January 2009, Provost Mary Marcy called for a General Education Assessment Committee, chaired by then-faculty member John Weinstein and composed of 10 faculty, to assess all general education requirements at Simon's Rock. The committee compared the curricula at Simon's Rock to peer institutions including BHSEC Manhattan and BHSEC Queens as well as nearly 40 colleges and universities. They invited all faculty members to participate in interviews and sought the perspectives of students by analyzing student questionnaires from the Spring 2008 semester and by inviting all students to a community meeting where each First-Year Seminar section was required to send at least one student representative.⁹² The final report of the committee emphasized that faculty and students shared a commitment to a common intellectual experience across sections and interdisciplinarity in the Seminars, though what is meant by *interdisciplinarity*, how faculty and students understood it, and how it is communicated to students were very much open questions. The faculty generally wanted to expose students to a wide range of subjects, including those that students might be unfamiliar with, but were split over the issue of how much of a focus Seminar courses should place on chronology. In terms of incorporating non-Western texts into the curricula, the committee had two goals which were somewhat at odds. One stated goal was to "mainstream the study of other cultures by truly integrating them into the sequence of common courses," but another was to study non-Western texts outside of the general education curricula as departmental requirements.⁹³

Following the final report, the plan moving forward was to continue the work of the committee by having faculty create different proposals for a general education Seminar arc and convening the faculty to discuss the different models that would result. Additionally, further student input was captured by conducting focus groups and outreach to alumni. John Weinstein created "Axes for Analysis" that would help faculty think through some of the more pressing questions: Historical Time Frame, Meaning and Distribution of Interdivisionality, and Nature and Progression of Writing Assignments.⁹⁴ The historical time frame axis explicitly questioned how different approaches to chronology might impact "our students' educational needs...developmental needs . . . diversities."⁹⁵

The resulting faculty proposals all followed the three-semester model for Seminar, though one proposal had to cut a fourth Seminar dedicated to classical India in order to remain at three semesters. In response to the proposals, each faculty member of the committee submitted a narrative vote which identified which proposal they thought to be the best fit with an explanation for their choice. Each narrative vote was recorded anonymously. One

narrative emphasized the importance of interdisciplinarity to prepare students for a future which will demand “flexibility, adaptability, and mutability” rather than mastery of any particular discipline and stated that “this should be ‘general’ education, and it should be for the faculty and students.”⁹⁶ Several argued that Seminar had to engage with contemporary issues and events that students understood as having a direct impact on their lives. They pointed out that 30% of the students at Simon’s Rock were students of color, and Seminar needed to feature texts that related to diverse experiences. Other narrative votes also called into question the propensity of some seminars towards historical context rather than open-ended inquiry. The shared experience of Seminar, they argued, must be able to create new narratives through the shared interrogation of texts without those texts being overcoded by hegemonic narratives and relegating new voices to the status of non-canonical exceptions to the “story most of us (not all of us) now want to hear”⁹⁷ In other words, sprinkling diverse authors into “the canon” results in the domestication of new authors by the old master narratives and makes it impossible for the professor and students to arrive at anything new or serendipitous when reading different texts together.

This process ultimately resulted in the approval, in Spring 2010, of learning goals for a three-semester Seminar arc focused on “Western civilizations, including diversities within them.”⁹⁸ First-Year Seminar I: Self and Cosmos included texts from antiquity to the 15th century and dealt with “the Levant, the Mediterranean world, and Europe, particularly on the Hellenistic, Judeo-Christian, and Islamic cultures within . . . Western Civilization.” First-Year Seminar II was titled Knowing: Revolution and Enlightenment and focused on the scientific, political (“American, French, and others”), and industrial revolutions between the 16th century and 1850s before ending with colonialism. Sophomore Seminar: Transformations, Boundaries, and Crossings, focused on rapid global transformations between 1850 and the late 20th century. Students were given a chance to respond to these proposed courses and reading lists shortly after they were released when a student forum was hosted by several members of the faculty. One thing that came across very clearly at the forum was that students wanted a much more diverse array of non-textual materials, including visual and auditory “texts,” and that students also wanted more opportunities to respond creatively to texts outside of the written page. Students also called for more interdisciplinarity, a clarification on what “diversity within civilizations” is actually going to mean, and a minimum of one major text per semester from a non-Western source.⁹⁹ In the end, the vast majority of texts written by authors of color were to be found in Sophomore Seminar until they were shuffled into Seminar III in 2013. This curricula remained until the 2017-2018 academic year when Seminar III was removed from the catalog and Seminar was reduced to a two-semester sequence to make room for a writing intensive Freshman Composition course.¹⁰⁰

“WE BELIEVE. WE INSIST.”

Although Seminar was not the proximate cause of the Diversity Day protests of 2012 at Simon’s Rock, it did figure into calls for curricular reform. It is in this light that I will examine the protests and boycott, rather than delving into the sprawling debate over Diversity Day. The general outlines and tenor of the debate will be familiar to anyone who has been paying attention to the discourse on race in America today. Calls for reform were met with vitriol, and virtually every online article in the student newspaper that covered Diversity Day and the protests had to close its comment section. The criticisms of diversity programming on campus will also feel familiar: to discuss racism is “reverse racism” which discriminates against white Americans; diversity in the curricula is a part of a “Great Replacement” by which white, Euro/American culture is being replaced by the culture and values of immigrants and people of color; “great” texts and authors are being replaced by “diverse” texts and authors, which is a form of “affirmative action” that grants undue privileges to less qualified authors whose writings have less value than “canonical” authors and texts.

Before Diversity Day, it is necessary to first go back to 2006 when Frances Kendall, a consultant for organizational change specializing in issues of diversity and white privilege, reported the results of a campus diversity “climate assessment” that had been drawn from 16 focus groups and interviews with individuals on the campus. Kendall lauded the positive qualities of Simon’s Rock, but also delivered a difficult message about efforts to create a more diverse culture on the campus of the early college. Supportive professors who made efforts to treat all students equally, accessible administrators, and a strong desire for community were all cited as making conversation and change possible. Nevertheless, Kendall also concluded that faculty of color were “in pain and have been psychologically damaged” by a “whiteness is normal” culture that made them feel like they did not belong and that their ideas were “dangerous.” She also noted a male-centric culture that stifled female faculty who were hit with apathy when they suggested reforms.¹⁰¹ One student, a senior, pointed out that students had been expressing the same concerns for years and a Race Task Force had previously highlighted many of the same issues, but they felt the findings had been ignored until Kendall, an outside expert, came in to pronounce the same message.¹⁰²

To begin to mend these wounds, Kendall suggested constant dialogue on the topics of race and diversity that did not put the burden on students of color to “tell their story” over and over, but required all students to interrogate race, including whiteness. Additionally, an even and transparent administration of the College’s rules, a space on campus designated for students of color, and the creation of more avenues for monitoring and discussing issues of diversity were all cited as needs. Many of these concerns, Kendall pointed out, could be best addressed in the General Education Seminars since they were required of all,

taught by many of the faculty, and represented knowledge that was considered foundational.¹⁰³

Almost two months later, the first Diversity Day was held at Simon's Rock on March 15, 2006 by students, faculty, and the Race Task Force. Faculty were asked to cancel classes or excuse students who chose to attend Diversity Day and participate in some of the 31 workshops during the teach-in titled, "Bursting the Bubble at Simon's Rock: A One-Day Teach-In on Diversity."¹⁰⁴ After this first year, students pushed to make attendance at the event mandatory, given the difficulties they were having in creating a conversation about diversity on the campus if only like-minded students attended. The Faculty Senate approved the measure in a unanimous vote. By 2012, when the Diversity Day protests took place, workshops on race and gender had been joined by discussions of diversity of religion, sexuality, and body image. The protests were prompted by swastika graffiti which had been found in the Kendrick House lounge on September 16, 2012 and posters which were hung in the Student Union asking students to "Name 5 Benefits of Diversity (besides ethnic food and music)" and to email their answers to a student email.¹⁰⁵ Thirty-six students, some of them leaders of Diversity Day workshops, signed a petition promising to boycott Diversity Day as a result of these incidents and what they perceived to be the inaction of the administration to truly commit to creating a diverse campus culture where all students could feel safe and accepted for the complexity of who they were.¹⁰⁶ The Owl's Nest Coalition, comprising the Black Student Union, Feminism is for Everyone, International Students Club, Latino Student Alliance, Queer Student Alliance, and the Race Task Force, further issued a list of grievances at a Community Council meeting on November 7th. The Owl's Nest presentation specifically called for "Reworking of Seminar: more female authors, more people of color, less Western philosophy" as one of their suggested reforms."¹⁰⁷ While many of the changes suggested by the Owl's Nest were accepted by Provost Peter Laipson, the proposed reforms to Seminar needed to be addressed by the academic bodies that governed curriculum.

In 2013, this resulted in an ad hoc committee on Social Justice putting forth a recommendation that Academic Affairs reform the Seminar curricula. First-Year Seminar I, First-Year Seminar II, and Sophomore Seminar became Seminar I, II, and III. The proposed curriculum for Seminar III was a course focussing on 1850–present and included some previously highlighted works by Susan Sontag and Jorge Luis Borges, new works by previously featured authors such as Du Bois and Woolf, and the inclusion of entirely new authors such as Frantz Fanon, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Hannah Arendt, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Simone de Beauvoir, selections of jazz, and a focus on photography, art, and film.¹⁰⁸ By 2015, however, students were frustrated by the pace and scale of change and delivered an address, "WE BELIEVE. WE INSIST." at a Community Council meeting where they insisted upon "a greater shift away from the Eurocentric, male-centric curriculum." "This is true for all courses," they argued, "but especially Seminar, since it represents the material with which the college feels all students should have familiarity."¹⁰⁹

Soon thereafter, Provost Laipson announced that all Simon’s Rock curricula would be reviewed including Seminar “with the questions of inclusion very much in mind.”¹¹⁰ This coincided with a letter from President Botstein earlier that same year in which he urged faculty across the Bard network to defend liberal education and reject the idea, which Hall criticized in 1966, that the goal of a liberal education was to make oneself saleable and acquire a career at the terminus of the educational system. Instead, he pointed to the value that liberal inquiry had in the public sphere and called for a renewed focus on older liberal traditions as well as more recent social, economic, and political issues: migration and immigration, the future of work, the crisis of politics, and environment/ecology.¹¹¹ Asma Abbas, in her role as Simon’s Rock’s Emily Fisher Faculty Fellow, was tasked with leading the faculty in the revision process.¹¹² The results of this effort did yield a more diverse curriculum as well as a better distribution of texts by authors of color and non-Western authors across the three Seminar. Although there was instructor leeway in terms of selecting texts, Seminar I: Life Examined featured such texts as *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Fadimann, *Early Spring*, a landscape scroll, by Guo Xi, *Barracoon* by Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* alongside Shakespeare, Plato, Sophocles, and others. Seminar II: An Invitation to the Modern similarly mixed *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater* by Du Bois, *Twilight* by Anna Deveare Smith, *The Afro-American Symphony* by William Grant Still, *Crazy Brave* by Joy Harjo, and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid alongside Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, Marx and Engels, and others.¹¹³

“MY SOUL WANTS SOMETHING THAT’S NEW, THAT’S NEW”

“During this time of ‘educational and ecological crisis,’” begins University of New Mexico professor of Native American Studies and Language Literacy Sociocultural Studies, Gregory Cajete, in an essay on the state of education in the 21st century.¹¹⁴ Cajete is right. Under the guise of educational reform, the bureaucratization of American education is well underway, even, and perhaps especially, in urban areas looking to prove that they are making progress. Under the guise of “accountability” we get canned curricula, panoptical surveillance of faculty and students alike, deprofessionalization of the profession of teaching, enforced uniformity, an ever-proliferating barrage of standardized exams, benchmark exams, state exams, district exams, and local exams, and a blossoming martyrology of the teacher which venerates the patron saint of burnout as teacher turnover leaves students with buildings full of novice teachers, many of whom will be gone before they get tenure. The latest superintendent brings in the latest initiatives, which ask ever more of teachers and deliver ever less meaningful education to students, only to be replaced in a few years by the next superintendent and their new slate of initiatives, soon to be abandoned. It’s no wonder teachers develop initiative fatigue and struggle against the impulse to survive by becoming jaded and withdrawn. Many of our

students have spent most, if not all, of their lives in this system and they may even come into our classes expecting more of the same. It is precisely in its radical difference to this paradigm that Seminar gives us hope as well as a place to rally in defense of a liberal, humanistic education.

In a series of seminars taught on the topic of Black Women's Poetry and delivered in Berlin in 1984 at the behest of Dagmar Schultz, Audre Lorde outlined some of the key provisions of what a seminar could be. These lectures are especially helpful because Lorde, in addition to promoting close reading and textual analysis, also pulls back the curtain on her thought process behind the structure and tone of her Seminar. The list that follows is my adaptation of her thoughts for the sake of clarity and brevity:

1. Active examination of the texts alongside the lived experience of the students and instructor.
2. The willingness of the seminarian and students to learn about each other and thus humanize each other.
3. Recognition of the multiplicity of all identities and the complexity of self-identification.
4. The collective imagining of a better future which has not yet been.
5. A syllabus that responds to who the students are as well as who the instructor is.
6. A willingness to be uncomfortable or upset and yet feel "safe."
7. "Putting yourself on the line" as a precondition for participation.
8. A commitment to praxis outside of the Seminar.
9. A commitment to writing, to "put it down" on paper and worry about revisions later.
10. An openness to explore the depths of difference, including the pain of others.
11. To avoid metamorphosis into a becoming-computer or a becoming-machine of the oppressive structures that mold us into their functioning parts and silent majorities.¹¹⁵

Lorde's Seminar is democratic and premised upon the notion that the seminarian and the student have no choice but to co-exist in a shared space that necessitates an honest examination of how they arrived in this space as well as

where they would like to go in the future. Mbembe makes much the same argument when discussing the future of democracy:

The in-common (of democracy) presupposes a relationship of co-belonging and sharing . . . the idea of a world that is the only one we have and that, to be sustainable, must be shared by all those with rights to it, all species taken together. For this sharing to become possible and for a planetary democracy to come to pass, the democracy of species, the demand for justice and reparation is inescapable.¹¹⁶

Lorde's thoughts, as well as Mbembe's, provide a useful framework for distilling the conclusions of this essay.

I have never understood Seminar as a tradition or inheritance that should be passed down to the next generation, nor do I believe the transmission of content or context to be a significant goal of a Bard Early College Seminar class. Seminar should help students to deepen their thinking and reading, to refine writing and analysis, to express their thoughts and writings publicly, and to see themselves as participants in a human conversation which began long before they were born and will hopefully not end anytime soon. As such, I have always bristled at the idea that students must learn about the Enlightenment, the French or American Revolutions, this, or that. There is undoubtedly value in examining these subjects, though I question whether Seminar is the right place. Certainly an instructor can give students context for a text, but the context can quickly *become* the text and push inquiry to the margins of the course. What I am most strenuously opposed to is the notion that Seminar is in service to a Western tradition or civilization that students need to be informed about, even if they are asked to question it. The stance that we are being critical of the "Western canon" still serves to reify that such a canon exists and that it deserves the bulk of our attention in Seminar. This does not mean banning "Western" authors, but rather restructuring Seminar so that a text by Plato can be read alongside anything else and the questions we ask are relevant to the future that our students will build one day. If part of the goal of Seminar is to imagine a better collective future, we are going to have to give students the space to do so, instead of sucking all of the air out of the room as soon as we have promised students the chance to write and to think.

Instead, following Lorde and some of the best moments I've traced at Simon's Rock, I believe that a Bard Early College Seminar should be fundamentally democratic in nature. As Blücher argued long ago, the defining feature of a seminar should be that professors should place themselves on the same level as their students when it comes to seeking truth. The etymology of "seminar" as seedbed is only inherently problematic if we understand the sagacious seminarian to be outside of the seedbed tending to the sapling-students. All metaphors are imperfect stand-ins for complex realities, but the metaphor of both students and faculty alike in the seedbed growing together, both willing to accept the challenges of different texts and contexts, each not only being

heard but also listening and learning, is about as good as I have come across. That the seminar and the students can come together in the classroom and balance a challenging experience of difference with cultural responsiveness, personal growth with communal responsibility, putting oneself on the line with feeling safe, understanding the crises of the past and present and while looking forward to a more just and joyous future yet to come, is truly something worth imagining. This does not mean we must replace the paradigm of the all-knowing professor (good riddance) with an equally troubling, populist paradigm of the all-knowing students, but rather suggests that in order to *know* we must seek knowledge together as a community.

Finally, and as a number of authors quoted in this paper have argued, there can be no Seminar that does not grapple with the identities of our students and the realities of their lives in the United States and, often, elsewhere as well. An approach to Seminar centered on the concept of restorative pedagogy can have its own pitfalls, particularly if the instructor makes gross generalizations about their students and what they “should” be reading and thinking about. Here, Lorde’s point about the complexity and multiplicity of identities is key and it is also why Seminar must be democratic and why students must have a say, though not the only say, in the curriculum and the course. This can be done, and it’s far better to do it as a core component of the course rather than in a reactionary mode during which the curricula is only revised when students express their dissatisfaction. It is striking that defenders of the concept of “Western civilization” will sometimes point to democracy as perhaps the most important legacy of the Western world,¹¹⁷ and yet, so rarely are students given the opportunity to participate in anything like it. Simply put, if democracy is something to be valued and preserved, allow the students to participate in it as often as possible. I think professors might be surprised at what their students want to read, think, and write about.

That was the case when I brought student choice into my own Second-Year Seminar courses beginning in 2018. Having given students a number of units to choose from, each of which had a diversity of authors in terms of race, gender, sexuality, national origin, etc., I was never able to predict which units students would vote for. Though every class was predominantly female and predominantly African American, many of my students did not vote to study gender or race specifically, but opted instead for units on technology and humanity, sexuality, and the meaning of truth. Any facile notions that I may have had about what my students wanted to read contradicted the reality of how they voted when given a choice. And yet, when topics of race and gender did come up, for example with Janelle Monáe’s “Dirty Computer” in the technology unit, students did not shy away from discussing them even if they hadn’t chosen the units that focused on either. Furthermore, at the end of the class, I surveyed my students on their experience with this form of Seminar and they overwhelmingly stated that they enjoyed the class more because they were able to have a choice in what they studied and that the texts were more meaningful to them as a result. I say this not to push my curriculum or even my approach of making

Seminar more democratic (I could have done more!), but rather to encourage a democratic process, the details of which must be specific to each campus and to the teachers and students who will actually make Seminar come to life. The complexity of identities that Lorde alludes to demands that democracy be practiced between people who share a space and are willing to get to know each other in the course of their explorations together. No canned, though well meaning curriculum can be a substitute for putting ourselves on the line as a part of the learning process, and that means centering open conversations between professors and students about what goals we would like to set for our Seminars, what kind of community we are building, what our core principles will be, what kinds of questions we will ask, what truths we will seek, and what texts we will read.

In 1966 Elizabeth Blodgett Hall described Simon's Rock as a "superb educational plant."¹¹⁸ And so it has been. At its very best, Simon's Rock has been a democratic institution that has understood that the General Education Seminar succeeds or fails based on the willingness of students, professors, and administrators to come together, learn about each other, and discover together what Seminar could be. This all sounds simple enough, but it can be the hardest thing to put into practice. For administrators to step back from deciding curricula and focus instead on facilitating the emergence of curricula from the interactions between faculty and students; for both the seminarians and the students to make themselves vulnerable enough for this process to really happen; to create a community of learning and care that brings together diverse learners at Simon's Rock and around the Bard Early College network in liberal education centered on the reading of powerful texts;¹¹⁹ to imagine that a better future can be seeded, despite the myriad crises of yesterday and today, in the spaces where students are free to enquire and ask difficult questions "under the guidance of a supportive, deeply-committed college faculty"¹²⁰—it has never been more important. To insist otherwise, I think, is to become what Elizabeth Blodgett Hall warned about when founding Simon's Rock, "conventional minds with conventional text-book in hand."¹²¹

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