Upon enrolling at Milligan College, a private Christian liberal arts college in northeastern Tennessee, in the spring of 2001, I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was now a sophomore in college and had spent the first year of my post-secondary education at a branch of Kent State University near my hometown in Ohio. Feeling the need to transfer, I chose Milligan because I had visited it while I was in high school, my home church promoted it, and my parents bestowed their blessing so that I might attend. Initially, the small campus community was genuinely warm and welcoming. Making the transition from public university to private college was not easy, yet I felt confident — with this auspicious beginning — that I would be able to prosper in such a benevolent institution of higher learning. However, when I went to my first class, a course on the novel as genre, my worst fears were confirmed. Not only was the professor haughty and pedantic, but the classroom itself was sterile and foreboding, most unlike any classroom environment I had ever encountered before. As the semester progressed, I began to feel as if my student voice could not be spoken within such a stagnant educational milieu. During a colloquial, in-class discussion of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, I felt an imperative need to point out how the plight of the Creature paralleled such postmodern tragedies as that of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—the gun-wielding social outcasts of Columbine High School—since both the Creature and Eric and Dylan were pariahs who had committed violent acts in their respective communities. Unfortunately, since this commentary was not "scholarly" enough, I decided to hold my tongue. Most of the time, the interactions in this class never moved past students mechanically copying notes from the professor's handwriting on the board. When discussions did take place, they were fostered by the professor calling on students in an attempt to elicit responses. This "banking system" of education often rendered the classroom a place in which the expression of critical thought was discouraged in favor of a degenerative model of student regurgitation.

Furthermore, when the class began to discuss critical theory, there was a certain tacit disdain directed toward those of race/ethnicity and gay/queer. While the professor briefly discussed work that had been done in race/ethnicity areas, she never broached the topic of gay/queer studies as if to insinuate that they were not worthy of scholarly mention. Instead, we focused primarily on psychoanalysis, feminism, reader-response, Marxism, Deconstruction/Structuralism, and New Criticism. I found it strange that these critical approaches were being omitted when the state-funded institution I had formerly attended presented all of these (even race/ethnicity and gay/queer) in a comprehensive course format. Then it hit me: the majority of the Milligan campus population was white, bourgeois, and most probably, heterosexual. These educational biases not only limited the academic discourse Milligan offered, but they also prevented students from thinking critically and taking introspective inventory of their own lives through the intellectual processing of human differences. Indeed, it is this kind of obtuse college curriculum that prevents us, as a socially progressive society, from opening "our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions" (hooks, *Teaching 12*). Using the work of the acclaimed feminist scholar bell hooks, I
will attempt to prove how the discussion and study of controversial topics can be a conduit for fostering critical thinking, not only in colleges and universities, but on secondary levels of education as well. For the intents and purposes of this discussion, I have chosen the controversial topic of gay studies as an educational agent that can encourage students to transcend their own experiences and enable them to think critically about divisive social issues.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks writes candidly about an engaged pedagogy that confronts the cultural constructs created by racism, classism, and sexism. According to hooks, these three hegemonies, both within and outside the college classroom, are responsible for fostering intellectual boredom as well as the perpetuation of dominance. When boredom forged its way into her classroom communities, hooks decided “pedagogical strategies were needed that would intervene, alter, even disrupt the atmosphere” (*Teaching* 7). She writes passionately about the “engaged voice,” which is an educational vehicle for confronting biases that shape monolithic ways of knowing. While it may seem that there is only one way to genuinely grasp knowledge, only one way to formulate an “absolute” epistemology, hooks reminds us once again that this particular paradigm is not always infallible. As a pedagogical voice of dissidence, hooks not only calls for a revision of current educational paradigms, but also maintains that our thinking patterns and writing strategies must undergo a process of change as well. She further declares that “[t]he engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (hooks, *Teaching* 11). Without this critical dialogue with the outside world, the college classroom will never be infused with a spirit of renewal and “real world” awareness. Consequently, students will never buttress their critical thinking skills by engaging in a dialogue that opens their hearts and minds to persons whom they have never met, yet will no doubt encounter once they leave the sequestered space of undergraduate life.

One hotly debated issue in today’s academy is the topic of gay studies and the ramifications it has on the dynamic dialogue of the classroom. Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Debra A. Moddelmog elaborate on this particular classroom controversy in their article, “Coming-Out Pedagogy: Risking Identity in Language and Literature Classrooms.” As two Ohio State University English professors facing similar pedagogical dilemmas, Brueggemann and Moddelmog pursued a collaborative effort to write about their respective “coming-out” teaching methodologies. Whereas Moddelmog asserts her identity as lesbian-identified, Brueggemann claims the identity of a hard-of-hearing person because it situates her selfhood directly between hearing and deaf cultures. Presenting their pedagogical identities as “relational, fluid, conditional, and conditioned,” Brueggemann and Moddelmog encourage their students to “see the classroom as a place where the theoretical, the experiential, the personal, and the political merge to shed meaning on their lives” (328). It is precisely the discussion of difference (in regard to both lesbian existence and hard-of-hearing existence, respectively) that opens up the classroom to a larger discourse that is not limited to exclusive, scholarly topics. Indeed, both Brueggemann and Moddelmog advocate hooks’s idea of an engaged pedagogy, one that exists to challenge the academic status quo by empowering students with experiential knowledge.

Like Brueggemann and Moddelmog, hooks also takes risks in the application of her teaching philosophy. These risks are essential to the deployment of an engaged pedagogy in the university classroom. “Engaged pedagogy,” she says, “does not seek simply to empower students” (*Teaching* 21). Even as a tenured professor at Oberlin College, hooks continually revises and reworks the pedagogical stance she assumes within her classrooms in order to circulate empowerment from student to professor, and vice versa. This communal cycle places the professor in a position where he or she cannot remain content to passively elicit responses from students; rather, he or she must work to actively engage in the class discussion as both a guide and a consultant. Additionally, hooks contends that it is “productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” (*Teaching* 21). At the same time, however, hooks warns against the discussion of experience for experience’s sake. Instead, she insists that pedagogy centered on experiential knowledge is most effective when it “links discussions of facts or more abstract constructs to concrete reality” (*Teaching* 86). Brueggemann and Moddelmog’s coming-out pedagogy concurs with hooks’s methodology in
that it connects the material taught in classroom settings to personal experience and the various ways in which we process knowledge. Even as they remind students that "literature typically deals with humans and with the way that their bodies experience the world," Brueggemann and Moddelmog do not forget to point out how "these experiences are connected to epistemological, ontological, political, scientific, and economic frameworks through which our bodies are read and written" (329). By linking personal experience to differing modes of inquiry, Brueggemann and Moddelmog incite a dialectical exchange between personal experience and academic discourse in order to promote an individually relevant, yet communally activated, colloquium on the value of literature.

Taken as a whole, both hooks's and Brueggemann and Moddelmog's pedagogical models have proved efficacious at the university level on which they teach. However, one must consider how the university experience, for the most part, is generally thought to be one in which the status quo will be called into question regardless of what the dominant institutional pedagogy may entail. Thus, the truly revolutionary multicultural pedagogy will not emerge within the confines of a university classroom. Contrary to popular opinion, its locus would most certainly lie within the adolescent preparatory arena of high school. Most high school students are never challenged to think critically about any issue, probably because the majority of high school administrators feel they only need to emphasize rote memorization so that a student's aptitude will fulfill the minimum requirements for state-mandated tests. Nevertheless, there are critical issues that high school students deal with on a daily basis, and they come to class already equipped with some familiar knowledge. Their knowledge of everyday high school situations could be filtered through a teacher-guided classroom colloquium, which in turn would engage otherwise distant and detached students by allowing them to talk about their experience in a constructive manner. Even hooks recognizes that "[s]tudents may be well versed in a particular subject and [. . . ] be more inclined to speak confidently if [a] subject directly relates to their experience" (Teaching 87). While she is writing about college students here, the subject of a high school class inquiry could be taught in such a way that would encourage students to speak confidently about the issues that touch their daily lives.

The critical issues that influence the collective experience of high school students may include controversial topics like teen pregnancy/abortion, underage drinking, and juvenile delinquency. However, it is the issue of gay teens that incites incendiary debate among both high school students and their administrators. D'Arcy Fallon confirms that high school discussion of gay teens is a potentially loaded topic in her Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph news article, "Discussion of Homosexuality in Schools a Lightning Rod." She reports on Debra Chassoff's instructional video, It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School, which is purportedly supposed to "educate children about gays and lesbians in an age-appropriate manner" (Fallon 2). One of several people interviewed by Chasnoff, eighth grade teacher Robert Roth comments on the need for gay-related education in public schools. When asked how he would respond to a student calling one of his or her peers a "faggot," Roth says, "I react the same way when I hear a girl called a bitch. It shouldn't be tolerated in school [. . . ] but you can't just say "stop." You have to educate about it. And if you don't educate about it, it won't stop" (Fallon 2). Roth voices the need for gay-related curriculum on the middle school level, which most certainly cannot exist without the implementation of an engaged pedagogy on behalf of teachers and administrators. Whenever the subject of gay-related curriculum arises, however, many teachers and administrators (as well as parents) automatically assume that the subject will somehow involve the sexual practice of gay individuals. Fallon dispels this myth as she comments on how her eight-year-old son might be affected by the presence of gay-related curriculum in the public education system. "Right now, he's too young to know about the nuts and bolts of sex," she writes, "[b]ut he's not too young to know about respect — both for himself and other people" (Fallon 2). Carefully and concisely, Fallon disassociates gay sex from interpersonal respect — a concept all students on the high school level should become familiar with during their ninth grade year of study.

One might ask why it is so imperative that students receive this gay-related curriculum during the ninth grade. Before this pivotal period of an adolescent's life, he or she should not be expected to confront such a controversial issue in a classroom setting, regardless of the critical thinking it might engender. Furthermore, in regard to middle school curriculum, any subject that
connotes sexual innuendo — as with gay-related education — often inspires student snickering as well as ridicule. Thus, middle school students will not take the subject seriously and teachers will broach the topic with an increasing dread and antipathy. On the other hand, if high school administrators delay the implementation of a gay-related education until after the ninth grade, the topic loses the force of its impact on both personal experience and critical thinking skills. Standing on the threshold of their high school experience, ninth grade students need to be presented with a controversial educational agent like gay-related study so that they can take the first step toward becoming critical thinkers. This first step should urge students to abandon their egocentric viewpoints forged in middle school and encourage them to embrace a high school perspective that can adequately consider the range and origins of multiple viewpoints. In her college classrooms, bell hooks addresses "the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively" (Teaching 91). This diverse standpoint can be taught through multicultural curricula that permits ninth grade students to see the world through the eyes of a culturally diverse "Other" figure. Students who engage in this healthy intellectual exercise and develop it into a habit at the very beginning of their high school careers will therefore be able to enter the process of interpreting and accessing knowledge in a socially inclusive fashion as opposed to a socially exclusive one.

Although gay-related study is one of several multicultural curricula that can encourage high school students to imagine how the world appears for an "Other" figure, it is the one that can most radically alter a student's egocentric viewpoint. For example, a curriculum centered on the study of race/ethnicity may enable some students to acknowledge that an Other exists, but will ultimately fail to cultivate ways of seeing the world from a different perspective. Most students will probably interpret that the race/ethnicity curriculum does not apply to them (given that their own race/ethnicity is a fixed entity), or worse, they will pay lip service to the study of race/ethnicity and thereby enact a tokenism that invokes contrived sympathy rather than genuine empathy. Conversely, a curriculum consisting of gay-related study compels students to see the 'Other' as an invisible, fluid entity that can oscillate within any person's core identity, regardless of his or her color, class, or creed. If students imagine such an entity, they may subsequently form these questions in their minds: (1) How can one determine who is gay and who is not gay?; (2) Could someone in my high school be gay?; and (3) How would I feel if someone I knew were gay? All three of these questions enable students to think critically. To demonstrate, the first question implores students to identify the limits of empirical analysis and to employ critical thinking skills when considering such a delicate subject. The second question follows from the first in that these students are actively applying newfound critical thinking skills to their most immediate interpersonal environment: their high school population. Finally, the third question moves the critical thinking process from the interpersonal to the introspective as these students embark on a journey of self-reflection that usually, as it currently stands, does not happen until college for the average high school individual.

Even with its potential to encourage students to think critically about themselves and the multicultural world in which they live, gay-related study would inevitably come under attack from those who believe that the public school system should be remain free from the discussion of controversial issues. Ed Vitagliano, in "Schools Should Not Stress Acceptance of Homosexuality," maintains that the discussion of gay-related issues in public schools undermines the conventional values promoted by students' families. He suggests that "the underlying belief of these social architects [e.g., Debra Chasnoff] is that parents cannot be trusted to convey the truth about homosexuality to their children," and that they seem to think that "[t]he intervention of the public school is necessary" (Vitagliano 3). Vitagliano goes on to severely criticize teachers who permit their students to watch Chasnoff's It's Elementary because of its positive portrayal of gay teachers (and, by extension, gay people in general). His disapproval becomes even more apparent when he describes a real-life classroom encounter between students and two upstanding gay citizens that took place in Kim Coates's eighth grade health science class at Luther Burbank Middle School in San Francisco. According to Vitagliano, the first speaker, a lesbian, told Coates's students that "she didn't come to school to recruit kids into the homosexual lifestyle," but rather "she came to change their minds about gays" (4). Vitagliano, however, fails to comment on how these gay-related issues might directly relate to the students' personal experiences, and neglects to mention how these encounters may foster critical thinking.
skills in relation to larger society. At the same time, this particular lesbian speaker errs by informing the students that she “came to change their minds about gays.” If students are to develop any kind of critical thinking skills from classroom discussions of gay-related curriculum, then they must learn to question these issues for themselves and deliberate their own answers.

Perhaps it would be more effective if gay-related curriculum were rooted in high school experience; that is, if students could intellectually process a real-life event that involves a gay high school student, and subsequently apply critical thinking skills to formulate a solution. Consider the following example:

When Christian Hernandez was 14 and a Grade 9 student at Notre Dame College High School in Niagara Falls, [Ontario], he screwed up his courage and told his best friend that he was gay. That was his first mistake. “He told me he couldn’t accept it,” recalls Hernandez. “And he began to spread it around.” Over the next two years, Hernandez was teased and harassed almost daily. One day, a group of boys waited for him after school. Their leader had a knife, and, says Hernandez, “He told me he didn’t accept faggots, that we brought AIDS into the world.” The boy then cut Hernandez on the neck, putting him in the hospital for a week. When Hernandez told his parents the reason for the attack, his father, who has since moved back to his native El Salvador, said he would “rather have a dead son than a queer son.” (Dwyer 1)

In the above example, several critical issues intersect, among which include gay identity, the coming-out process for teens, gay/straight interpersonal relations, teen violence, homophobia, family acceptance/rejection, and cultural perception of gay people in general. Students, after reading this news article excerpt, could initiate the critical thinking process by first asking questions about the events described. These questions might be (1) Why did Hernandez come out at age 14?; (2) Why could his friend not accept the reality of this revelation?; (3) What motivated Hernandez’s friend to tell other students?; (4) Why did the leader feel he had to physically assault Hernandez?, and so forth.

Then, with teacher-guided assistance, students could make crucial connections between this solitary event and the cultural logic that informs such an event. Then they may ask questions like (1) What forces gay teens to remain silent about their sexual identities?; (2) What causes homophobic attitudes to be expressed as violent actions?; (3) Should violence against gay people be prohibited in hate crime legislation?; and (4) Why is AIDS commonly associated with gay individuals? This set of questions differs from the first set in that they demonstrate how students might employ critical thinking to move past the event described and engage in an analysis of the culture at large. From this convergent point, students can then address the situation from the diverse standpoint of the Other (whether it be Hernandez, his friend, his attacker, or his father) and devise a prospective solution. Whatever this solution might be, it would be formulated entirely by the dialectic process of critical thinking initiated by the controversy contained in an example of gay-related curriculum.

At this particular moment in time, the methodology outlined in the preceding discussion remains grounded in theoretical assumptions and has yet to be proven in practical application. Indeed, most of these assumptions are of the a priori variety, and have very little weight in the broad schemata of secondary education curriculum. However, bell hooks, in Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations, negates the claim that progressive theoretical work is irrelevant to professional fields like secondary education. She argues that “[l]ife-sustaining political communities can provide a [. . .] space for the renewal of the spirit,” and concludes that this space can only be realized if “we address the needs of the spirit in progressive political theory and practice” (Outlaw Culture 248). Although hooks is referring to political communities here, her insightful commentary extends to educational communities as well. For these same life-sustaining communities need to be created in high school settings in order to create spaces where teachers can practice an engaged multicultural pedagogy that renews minds and promotes critical thinking.

Concurrently, one must also consider that progressive multicultural curriculum like the gay-related study described here does not often enter into the curriculum of secondary education institutions. Yet the value of such curriculum has already been put into practice and proven valuable at the university level. Jack Meacham, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York-Buffalo, discusses how he negotiates issues of controversy and difference in his “American Pluralism” course.
The issues that arise in a multiculturalism course can touch students very personally, for gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and race are among the core dimensions of the identities that traditional college-aged students and young adults are constructing. Conflict is less likely to occur if faculty members can stay in touch with what students in the course are thinking — but not saying aloud. A simple procedure for learning what students really think is to end the discussion a few minutes early and ask students to write and hand in short, anonymous paragraphs that summarize an issue's pros and cons, or tell how the class discussion could be improved. (2)

Procedures like these might also be implemented on the high school level in order to stimulate critical thinking. Although some might argue that high school students, let alone those in the ninth grade, do not have the capacity to comprehend the issues discussed by college-aged undergraduates in Meacham's course, it is nevertheless imperative that issues of controversy and difference are broached in some way by secondary educators in order to prepare all students for full participation in our pluralistic American society. Without this educational engagement with difference and plurality, high school pedagogy cannot be infused with an ethos of social responsibility. One must actively question why high school pedagogy remains confined to the ubiquitous "teaching for the test" model, and consider whether a government-subsidized test can truly educate for the critical consciousness that is needed by all citizens in every occupational sphere. High school students, living in what many people perceive to be an idyllic microcosm, are actually interacting with one another as citizens in a teeming sociocultural locale (where else but high school can one be so diverse and expressive before having to conform to conventional expectations?). These students need to discover the crucial self-awareness that comes through learning about human difference so they can fully realize their citizenship, not as passive consumers, but as active participants in an American democracy they too can change.

The call to address issues of human difference does not only inform the work of university educators like hooks, Brueggemann and Moddelmog, and Meacham; it also influences creative thought, generates ideas about social equality, and solidifies conceptions of human identity. Audre Lorde, in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," writes: Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. (111)

Today's high school students need to learn how to live in an interdependent society, both on the micro level (the high school atmosphere) and the macro level (society at large). Critical issues of controversial human differences can facilitate the knowledge necessary for high school students to live in both societies, regardless if they are enrolled in vocational or college preparatory programs. As Lorde points out, for each new generation that graduates from secondary schools, there are no charters, no blueprints for social survival once they leave the hallowed halls of high school. Discussing issues of difference and controversy will enable them to think critically about the human condition and ultimately inspire them to strive to become well-rounded public citizens.

Works Cited


