education is supposed to be, much less why they might need or want one. They have absorbed the prevailing nostrum that in order to secure a decent job you must have a college degree, but that knowledge has only encouraged many of them to assume that college should provide a form of job training. They have also absorbed an unhealthy dose of multicultural sensibility, notably, a self-righteous conviction that no one has the right to impose upon them any views or facts that might challenge their self-esteem, which, for many, means knowledge about any person or event that does not reflect or speak to their own identity. The ways of thinking manifest in the new curriculum, which promises to be the wave of the future, effectively capitulates to these presentist assumptions and may well reinforce and institutionalize them. If so, it will represent not multiculturalism’s defeat, but its triumph in a new, and ultimately more dangerous, form.

Tommy-Rot in Toontown: Multiculturalism and Cowardice

*Cary Nelson*: Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

A symposium on multiculturalism in *Academic Questions* is obviously not exactly a disinterested trying of the case. The guilty party is being brought out to be condemned and executed yet again. Meanwhile, those of us on the left are here to remind you in the flesh of what you love to hate. So what is there to do? Well, I have decided to tell you some of the stories you want to hear, but in order to draw some different conclusions from them. Both stories will be pedagogical, the first focusing on anthologies and the curriculum, the second on the professoriate. I will conclude with some remarks on the National Association of Scholars and how it engages issues like multiculturalism.

Everyone who teaches literature knows my first example well—the big anthology that ends with a spray of often depressingly second-rate “multicultural” poems or stories. They’re not as good as the whiter texts that precede them and so they fuel the anger, resentment, guilt, and contempt of students and teachers alike. Whether secretly or openly, many are led to suspect that writers of color just do not measure up. For critics of multiculturalism or the expanded canon, of course, including more than a few NAS members, such books are welcome sitting ducks. “I’m not biased,” it’s easy to argue, “I just believe in quality.”

Quality of course is always a relative and contingent value. In a given moment our convictions about it may seem incontrovertible, but history shows
not only that books fall in and out of favor but also that books we value over time are often valued for different reasons, often read and interpreted very differently.

But beliefs about quality are often held with great conviction. When Cleanth Brooks in 1939, in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, remarked on how much bad politically committed poetry had been written during the preceding decade, he no doubt believed he was absolutely right. He thought this work so wretched there was not any reason for people to read it for themselves. Nevertheless, he allowed, if you do want to get a glimpse of just how bad poetry can be, a look at Langston Hughes.

Brooks’s work was hugely influential, and it helped keep Hughes marginalized for decades. Few modern poetry specialists now would agree with Brooks. Interestingly enough, another poet mostly out of favor in the 1930s, despite the publication of editions of his collected poems in the 1920s, was William Blake. Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, like many of Hughes’s poems, often present complex social ideas in a deceptively simple but actually carefully nuanced form. To get a full sense of what Blake or Hughes is saying requires a great deal of thought; considerable interpretive pressure has to be placed on poems that seem more straightforward than they are. Neither Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* nor any of Hughes’s poems matched the surface complexity of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or the more rhetorical irony of John Crowe Ransom’s poems, two modern styles much preferred by influential critics like Brooks.

We waited until 1994 for a Hughes collected poems, while generations grew up with most of his work out of print. Blake meanwhile by then had long come back in favor, but Blake was white. What’s more, Blake’s revolutionary politics seemed safely distant, distant enough to appear anti-industrial rather than fiercely anticapitalist. Hughes, however, was long allied with the Communist Party. To get Hughes a fair hearing was no easy matter, and the job is far from done. To imagine that we now exist in a moment when these or comparable matters do not shape our judgment is to be rather deluded. So at the very least a certain cultural humility needs to be cultivated when we speak of quality.

As Hughes began to be anthologized by white editors, however, most of his strongest poems were ignored. The searing indictments of racism presumably made these editors uncomfortable, so they opted instead for poems expressing Hughes’s desire for racial harmony. The pattern continues today. You may read selections from Yusef Komunyakaa’s prize-winning selected poems in comprehensive American literature anthologies, but you probably will not read his most challenging and unsettling poems, like “Work,” his poem about a black worker’s lust for a white female employer, or “To Do Street,” his poem about white and black troops in Vietnam sleeping sequentially with the same prostitute.