



Gregory Jay Responds

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idealisms that “affirm and support” the primacy of consciousness over material, historical conditions. The agency of change in these discourses is the semiotically “free” bourgeois subject whose *real unfreedom* rests in the *material* worldliness of labor’s subjection to capital, which is fundamentally nothing other than the persistence of *slavery*.

By the end of the day, surrounded by all of his gloriously new “literary” works, our good democratic teacher has forgotten who *made* his books; he has forgotten that the “literary” work is itself the expression and the embodiment of the most tyrannical social order the world has ever known. His wildest nightmare turns around the idea that *it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness*.

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GREGORY JAY RESPONDS

Professor Frankforter’s comment on my essay begins with the suggestion that I have spent too long belaboring an insignificant point, and that I have done so in unnecessarily complex language. If there is any validity to these charges, it is demonstrated by Professor Frankforter’s failure to grasp my most basic contention. He states that “the assumption that looms behind [Jay’s] argument is that everyone represents only him/herself in the narrowest of senses.” One need not look to what “looms behind” my essay, but to its

bald assertions, to see that I assume the opposite. “Classic liberal theory,” I write, “begins with the individual as its primary unit, whereas the current crisis of representation stems from the claim that *groups* also have a right to representation” (10). If this sentence, to paraphrase Frankforter, is too complex for the thought it mediates, let me translate: no one represents only him/herself, because as social beings we also represent *groups*.

The limitation of liberal theory lies in its insistence that individuals represent only themselves “in the narrowest sense,” and that this self-representation is an adequate basis for social and political and aesthetic theory. Liberal theory, and here I speak of the classic tradition of the Enlightenment, does not concern itself with “self-transcendence,” as Frankforter erroneously claims. Readers can consult, for background, *Liberalism and Its Critics*, edited by Michael Sandel, in which the debate between orthodox liberalism and various contemporary schools of communitarianism is explored. Communitarians (and this would include most variants of Left political theory, including much feminism, environmentalism, and anti-racism) stress the necessity of positing a communal “good” that transcends the individual self, and thus justifies the intervention of the state in issues of equality, property, rights or housing, for example. Orthodox liberal theory, which originated in eighteenth-century protests against the power of the centralized state, emphasizes the full exercise of individual self-interest free of

communal or state interference. Once one grasps something of the history of these debates, one will understand why orthodox liberals have joined conservatives (or become neoconservatives) during the “culture wars,” for the debates over race, the canon, affirmative action, and feminism challenge the adequacy of liberalism’s claims for the social virtue of self-interest. Self-interest and group interest are not the same, as anyone who belongs to a group can testify. It is this elementary point that Professor Frankforter overlooks. In so doing, he wrongly characterizes my essay as one focused on *individual* biases, when the entire thrust of the argument is to explore *group* biases.

Professor Frankforter eloquently declares that “the ability of the Western tradition to waken conscience and to inaugurate social and political reform springs from its advocacy of self-transcendence.” But what did the Declaration of Independence say? “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Where in this classic exposition of liberal theory do we hear about “self-transcendence,” except in the sense that the self’s pursuit of its own interests is transcendent? Certainly Jefferson and the founding fathers took little official notice of the contradiction between the universalizing language of the Declaration and its practical exclusion of African Americans, Native Americans, women,

indentured servants, and unpropertied men. As so many commentators have noted, the advocates of liberal theory do not achieve “self-transcendence” when they posit universals: rather they *universalize their own interests* without recognizing the contradiction between such interests and those of other social groups.

Given this contradiction, my essay advocates replacing a misleading language of “self-transcendence” with a politics and ethics of *accountability*. This includes accounting for the fact that people “occupy more than one social or cultural position,” and so are never solely the vehicle of a singular self-interest. Rather than imagining that we can simply transcend our self-interests, a belief that usually involves a good deal of self-deception, I argue that we should be held accountable for those interests, that we should be responsible for them. In turn, we will have to take account of and respond to the self-representation of others (26–27). A move to transcend our self-interests can easily become a way of subordinating the self-interests of the less powerful or the marginalized. A move to accountability restrains the tendency to universalize one’s own self-interests. It is not through transcending one’s self-interests, but by making those interests accountable to others, that reform becomes possible: “While each seeks the skill and power to represent its own interests, each must also render its representations accountable to the other. Each must also consider how the production of its own self-rep-

resentation affects others, sometimes to the point of distorting or destroying the other's power to represent its interests" (27). If the "significance of the point" still eludes Professor Frankforter, perhaps he should render an account of his own self-interests and how they are served by the ideology of "self-transcendence."

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A COMMENT ON THE SYMPOSIUM ON BASIC WRITING

In her response to the commentaries in the Symposium on Basic Writing, "Conflict, Struggle, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy" (December 1993), Min-Zhan Lu uses language that has withered away with the changed demographics and "realities" of urban higher education. Despite her assertion that she "historicizes" the field of composition, her language belies the claim at every turn.

Words, as Virginia Woolf says, "live in the mind. . . . And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die." Lu attempts to pin words down emptying them of their past histories and places, putting them to use in a particular fashion. Emptied of historical and "local" meaning (in Clifford Geertz's sense), one word is made the equivalent of another, psychologically and politically charging discussion with a positive or negative valence. For example, in Lu's recent response, she

promotes "the image of the new *mestiza*" (by using the feminine form, she excludes males from her vision of education). She ignores the sunken meaning of the word *mestizo*, making the position of the mestizos in Latin America the equivalent of American students' position in the university, rousing the imagination to images of "oppressed" and "oppressor." Such language use polarizes the relationship between students and teachers in the university. Though *mestizo* has come to mean a person of mixed racial ancestry, it originally meant mixed European and Native American ancestry, and the term acquired most of its connotations in Latin America. It has been around for centuries and has stored meanings that are different in different places. In colonial Mexico, for example, the term *mestizo* emerged first as a colonial category in a period of European interest in the designation of racial groups by parentage. Class structure was clearly defined by the Spanish conquerors, and color was a factor: "Negroes" were distinguished from "mulattos" and "mestizos"; "criollos," whites born in Mexico, were considered inferior to "peninsulares," whites born in Spain. What then is the meaning of this word when plastered onto current educational and cultural discussions in America? Why should *all* students be homogenized into "the new *mestiza*" rousing adversarial historical images? Why should Asian or Haitian students in America feel comfortable with a word that has roots in Latin America?