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Pursuing the Universal Particular

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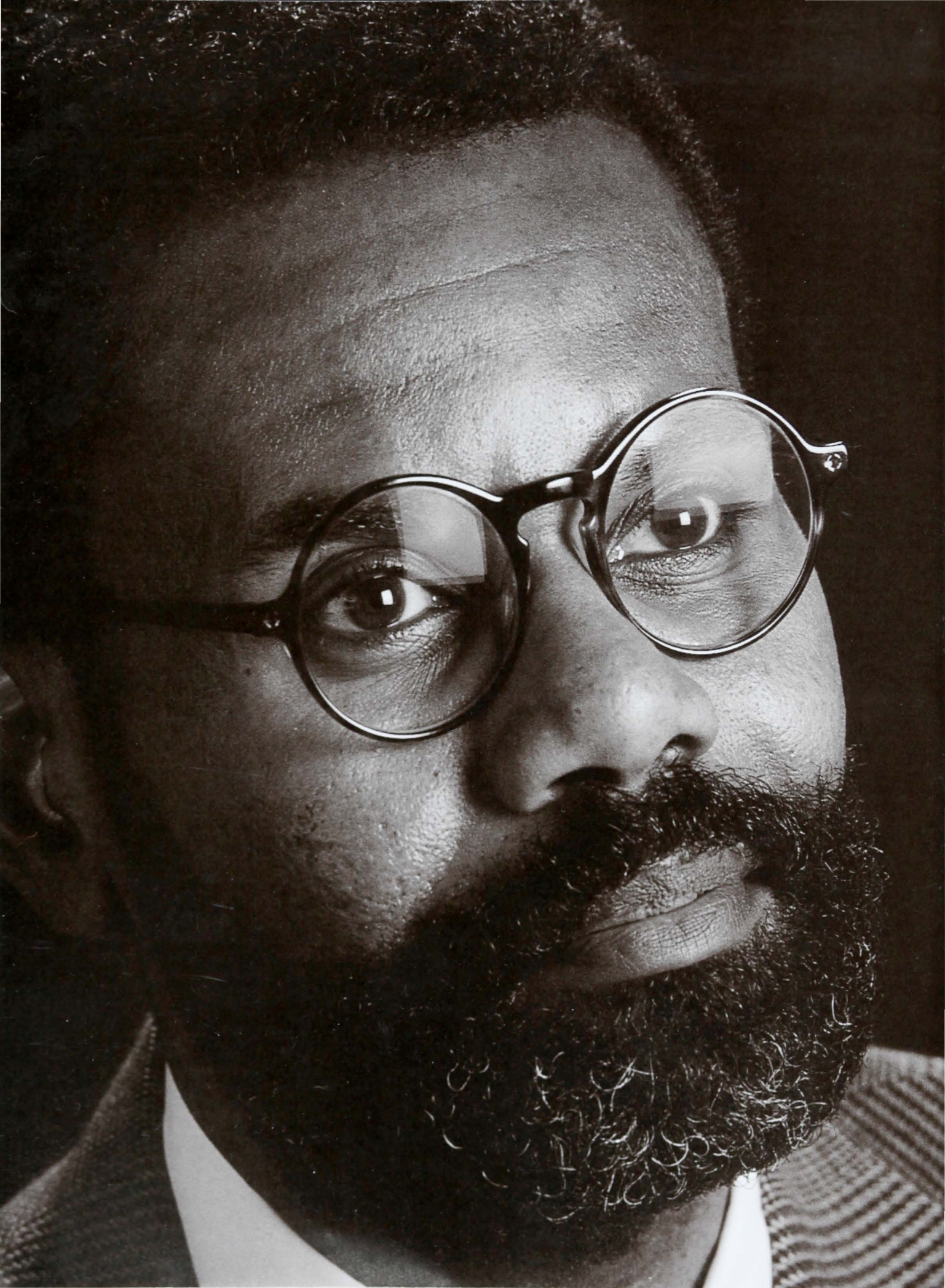


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PURSuing
THE
UNIVERSAL
PARTICULAR

PROFESSOR CEDRIC BRYANT

DEMONSTRATES THAT, LIKE POLITICS,

ALL LITERATURE IS LOCAL.

BY SALLY BAKER

Cedric Bryant leans forward slightly in his chair, seeming with that small movement to fill the space between himself and his listener, whom he pins with his eyes. “harriet,” he says, “if i be you/let me not forget/to be the pistol/pointed.”

He allows the quotation, from a poem by Lucille Clifton H ’94, to sink in for a few moments. Then his listener smiles—getting it, really hearing what the lines say—and Bryant beams back. He is all teacher, savoring the flash of recognition that signals a lesson learned. Not to lose the moment, he quickly segues to a line from Emily Dickinson: “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun. . . .”

“Lucille Clifton and Emily Dickinson both signify on the same metaphor, the loaded gun, in these two poems that are

astounded to see students spitting into their food. “I learned that you did this in order to deter these roving gangs—the bullies—from taking your lunch. It was a sort of desperate strategy that sometimes worked, sometimes didn’t,” Bryant says. “They would either be convinced and go pester somebody else, or they wouldn’t and they would take your lunch anyway, or they would demand that you spit in it in their presence.”

The family spent one year in Watts—“My mother worked very hard to get us out,” Bryant says—and then moved to an upper-middle-class, mostly Jewish neighborhood in West Los Angeles, where they managed several apartment buildings and where Bryant attended high school. “This was probably an even

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separated by over a hundred years. They *speak* to each other,” he says. The look on his face asks, Isn’t that something?

Bryant, a specialist in American and African-American literature and chair of the English Department, has taught at Colby since 1988. He is among the most popular professors on campus—the Class of 1994 awarded him the Senior Class Teaching Award—and he was named Maine Teacher of the Year in 1996 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

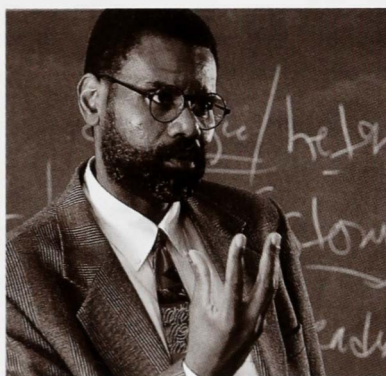
Bryant came to Mayflower Hill from a tenure-track position at Eastern Washington State University. But his journey really began in rural Arkansas before he was born.

His parents were reared in a small farming community. They lived on the same road, and both were members of large families. They left Arkansas in their early twenties to join the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to industrial cities in the North, principally Chicago. When Bryant was a small boy the family moved from Chicago to Los Angeles. Bryant’s father and uncle had been stationed in California during World War II and saw it as a place where everyone could prosper. But the family found that life could be hard there, too.

“I grew up in Los Angeles to the extent that anybody actually grows up in Los Angeles,” Bryant says. “What you do is survive childhood and adolescence.”

Bryant’s parents separated when he was in junior high school, and he, his mother and his brother and sister moved to Watts, one of the poorest sections of the city. It was 1963, two years before the Watts riots, and Bryant, who had been living in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, says he experienced “real culture shock.” Especially at school.

“There was a gruesome scene every day, with people getting beaten up, no order in the classrooms, teachers occasionally raped in the bathrooms, things like that,” he says. He remembers vividly his first day in the school lunchroom, where he was



greater culture shock,” he says, “but it was a benevolent kind of culture shock.” Hopeless in mathematics because all the moving around he did disrupted his math education—he notes that he still can’t balance his checkbook—Bryant says no one on the high school faculty took much of an interest in his academic future. “I was a black student in a predominantly white high school who played athletics and therefore fit a little too easily into stereotypes,” he says. Still, his strengths in reading and writing allowed him to spend three years on the school’s literary magazine and to take advanced English courses.

There were other lessons along the way. Bryant remembers his mother taking him and his siblings along on an apartment search. Standing on the sidewalk in front of one small, appealing complex, Bryant noticed a woman standing just to the side of the curtains in the manager’s office. She hurriedly drew the curtains closed. When the family knocked, she didn’t open the door.

“It wasn’t just about race,” Bryant says. “It was about sexism and gender, too. My mother was a single parent with three kids.” But, he adds, “There was not any real bitterness, it was more disappointment and shock. Somehow we were able to understand that, well, this would be difficult. If we owned an apartment, would we really want to take the risk of renting to a single parent with three very healthy kids, all of whom are big for their age?”

Bryant credits his mother with passing along that generous outlook. He got her appreciation for learning, too. “She was very proud of her own high school diploma,” he says. “And in terms of the personal as well as the social significance of an education and of a degree, her high school diploma was every bit as important as my undergraduate degree was. Both were very hard-won, and in terms of the ways in which degrees can be catalysts for upward mobility, they served the same purpose.”

Bryant’s grades were good enough to qualify him for college, but four years at a university “looked impossible,” he says. His

mother worried that the family would incur a massive debt, but with the help of a neighbor who went to Los Angeles City College and knew there were funds available for minority students at California's state universities, Bryant applied and was admitted to San Diego State University. He became the first member of his immediate family ever to attend college. Academic and basketball scholarships helped with expenses, although Bryant later turned down an NCAA scholarship to concentrate on his studies.

An English major, he says he studied the traditional canon—white American and European literature—almost exclusively until his junior year. “But at a moment I can no longer remember

I was saying was true, that Faulkner would acknowledge it as truth”), Bryant immersed himself. “The distance to be traversed was measurable not just simply in terms of race, my being black and Faulkner being white, but there were generational differences, there were regional differences, there were myriad kinds of differences that would have to be negotiated in order for me to become authoritative about Faulkner,” Bryant says. “What kept me coming back to Faulkner over and over again was the compelling way that Faulkner found to wrestle with his own prejudices. His own discomfort about race and his own discomfort with his culture’s racism is what creatively propelled so much of his fiction.”

Talking about Faulkner almost gives Bryant an aura, as if the

UN-HAMLET-LIKE. THERE IS A DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP TO EVIL YOU CREATE A WAY TO ACCOMMODATE EVIL, TO COEXIST WITH IT.”

in time but still can recall emotionally, I read the poetry of Audre Lorde and then learned, later, that she was black,” he says. From then on, though he never took a formal course in the subject, he was a voracious reader of literature written by African Americans. Reading on his own, he says, allowed him to “create [my] own pantheon, [my] own canon, not having any traditional parameters that were imposed by a teacher or a professor in a classroom. I think it freed me to roam all over the map.”

The depth of his exposure to African-American literature gave Bryant a chance to see how it is unique, especially since he also has read extensively (to say the least) in other genres. Take, for instance, the idea of evil. “In African-American literature, the model of a hero is un-Hamlet-like,” Bryant says, explaining that a protagonist like Hamlet struggles with his inability to defeat evil. “In African-American literature, there is a different relationship to evil and to large ideas like that. It’s more a matter that you create a way to accommodate evil, to coexist with it. Ultimately, what characters in Gloria Naylor’s fiction and Toni Morrison’s fiction and others realize is that there’s no such thing as annihilating evil. . . . Evil functions like the second law of thermodynamics covering energy: it can change form, but it can’t be destroyed. The big question becomes, how do I construct the right relationship to a world, to a cosmos, that’s greater than I am, bigger than I am, that allows me to live in harmony with it—and with myself.”

As a graduate student at the University of California at San Diego, Bryant taught American and African-American literature and literature in general. When it came time to select a topic for his doctoral dissertation, he considered Thomas Hardy—and discovered Colby’s special collection of Hardy materials—but found the author engaged his head and not his heart. “I was not passionate about it,” he says. “From there it was a short step to William Faulkner. One of the things I had always been was passionate about Faulkner—not positively, all of the time. Most of the time it was passion derived from perplexity and frustration, as well as a great deal of awe.”

Setting an agenda big enough for a dozen students (“I wanted to be able to write about Faulkner and to be really certain that what

air around him is charged. Sitting in his Colby office, he weaves a complex tapestry around the word *obverse*, which occurs in *The Sound and the Fury* when Quentin Compson concludes that “a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behaviour; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among.”

Take note, Bryant insists. “He didn’t say reverse or converse, he said obverse. . . . What Quentin is recognizing at that moment is that blackness and whiteness are not constants, not absolutes, but are cultural constructions. A nigger doesn’t in fact exist in any other way than in an abstraction, because it’s the obverse reflection of the white people he lives among.” When Bryant teaches *The Sound and the Fury*, he illustrates this point by asking a male student—if he’s lucky there’s one who matches his six feet, five-plus inches—to stand with him, back to back, in the center of the room. Obverse. “Culturally, historically, interpersonally, racially conjoined, inextricably bound together and yet bound together in a way that has them opposing each other, not seeing each other.”

Much as he appreciates “classic” American texts, Bryant says he doesn’t believe in a static canon, though what is taught within the constraints of a semester- or year-long course can have profound effects on students. He says he stresses to those who are considering careers in teaching that they need to recognize “the politics of the syllabus.”

“The decision about who and what to include and who and what to exclude is an act of either empowerment or disempowerment, and it has subtle but quite definite repercussions on the students, whose ideas of ‘American’ literature or ‘English’ or the ‘classics’ or the ‘canon’ are shaped by the power that a syllabus has and the power that the individual in the position of teacher has,” he says.

Asked what the difference would be if, say, he decided to teach Toni Morrison in place of Jane Austen, Bryant said, “In one way, it’s not a change at all. Morrison and Faulkner and others have said literature is *always* about universals. It’s always about things that transcend any particular culture, any particular historical moment, any particular racial or ethnic group. And it’s the denial of that fact which has created the kind of insidious bifurcations in the study of literature and culture that have caused problems

we're still trying to contend with. It's the reason we continue to ghettoize the study of literature and why it's always a struggle to move toward a more comparative, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary approach." He says he looks forward to the day when "so-called minority studies" are fully and seamlessly integrated into existing academic departments. "We'll know we're there when we can drop the term 'minority,'" he says.

Bryant himself is most engaged with literature that deals with moral imperatives—what Faulkner called the old verities. You'll find those, he points out, in all great literature.

"It's art for the sake of human beings. It's art in the service of society and of social relationships," Bryant says. "It's art to make the world a better place. Since I was a child I've gravitated toward literature which at least seems to uphold that particular value. . . . It's always been writers who are passionately concerned, although not always explicitly or in a way that's didactic, with moral issues, writers and texts that wrestle with the enormously complex problem of how to be a good person."

Bryant brings that passion into the classroom, along with the belief that teaching involves "helping students experience the literature and the culture three-dimensionally, by taking writers off of the flat page and giving them body, making them stand up

Bryant explained that in Du Bois's view, culture is a top-down phenomenon: the top tenth is supposed to be a civilizing element for everyone else.

"But," said a woman named Nina, "what if the tenth abandons the other ninety percent?"

Bryant's eyebrows lifted. Exactly. "It's a white, patriarchal mentality he's borrowing," he said. "It's operating with the same ideas as the people you are oppressed by, and the best you can do is assimilate, not stand out."

His classroom is a scene of complete civility—and that's important, Bryant says, because he wants students to be "comfortable enough to say what they think, to speculate, to risk being wrong and to run that risk out loud." He sometimes begins a course by saying that his students must accord each other the presumption of good intentions. Otherwise, he says, the class cannot go where the material—slave narratives, stories about "incest, rape, love, death, hatred, evil"—takes them.

Students still falter, especially when it comes to the word *nigger* and other inflammatory terms. But there comes a time, Bryant says, when one "no longer has to consciously raise those fingers to invoke quotation marks. Getting to the point where that's not necessary is the measure of how well you've learned to

A BRYANT CLASS IS A PERFORMANCE IN WHICH NOTHING WITH BRYANT PACING AMID THE TABLES ARRANGED AROUND

and walk in the classroom."

He means it literally. A Bryant class is a performance—sometimes starring him, sometimes starring the students, sometimes both—in which nothing takes place in the wings. It's all center stage, with Bryant pacing amid the tables arranged around him, backing up to within inches of a desk and stopping before he bumps into it, speaking in long, richly textured sentences. When he quotes a poem or a piece of prose he stands still, allowing students to focus on the words.

In a meeting of his African-American women writers course this semester, he read a passage from a W.E.B. Du Bois essay, "The Talented Tenth," in which Du Bois contended that his race would be "saved" by its exceptional people, its talented tenth. Bryant asked the students to rate the essay and to be as critical of it and of Du Bois as possible. "It's not always popular to cast stones at people like Du Bois," he said. "You and I have to get beyond that."

The essay uses the word *men* to represent all persons, male and female. Is that sexist? Bryant asked. How much latitude should Du Bois get, given that he published "The Talented Tenth" in 1903? Not much, according to one female student. "This was the time of woman suffrage," she said. "But Du Bois and the men of the Harlem Renaissance were talking specifically to men."

Another student chipped in that when Du Bois says "men" the implication is that men make better leaders. Still another pointed out that racists could use the idea of a talented tenth to keep a people down. "It's not enough. A racist could say, 'Only a tenth, by your own admission, deserve the vote,'" he said.

negotiate conflict and crisis. Also, it's the moment when you've moved beyond political correctness."

He gives an example from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, when Schoolteacher makes a list of Sethe's human and animal traits. In that context, Bryant says, "Sethe is not a Negro or an African American. Sethe is a nigger. . . . At the moment when one is inside Schoolteacher's consciousness, it is simply wrong, it's a distortion, to use 'African American' when he's talking about Sethe."

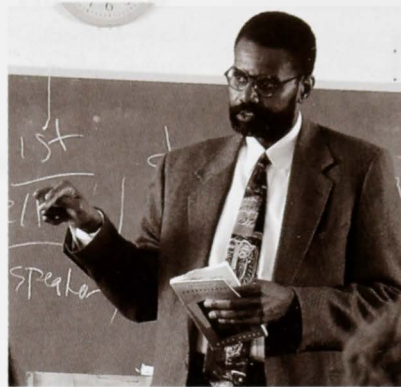
Bryant says he likes teaching at Colby because most of the students who enroll in his classes "come prepared to be changed in some way. They expect something not just intellectual but emotional to happen." One of the things his students seem most willing to do, he says, is to get beyond the "cultural cannibalism" so prevalent in our society.

"It's something bell hooks writes about—eating the other," he says. "We eat each other's culture on the level of entertainment, but it doesn't affect us substantially as people. Look at supermarkets, with their designated 'ethnic food' sections. You find tortillas in the same place you'll find gefilte fish and wasabi. It's a vacation. It's two weeks in the Bahamas. While you're there you might allow the housekeeper to do up your hair in dreadlocks, but you're going to be sure to un-dreadlock yourself before you pass through the turnstile at U.S. Customs. . . . That's what makes it cannibalism, a one-directional consumption of culture, not a relationship to difference and to cultural otherness that we allow to transform us, to add on to who we are. The great fear is that the cultural proximity of the other, the closeness of the other, is

somehow going to result in some diminution of ourselves: one minus one, not one plus one equals two."

Members of minority groups have little choice, Bryant says, but to form a relationship with the majority culture. He cites himself as an example. "When you happen to be virtually the only African-American male over six-five who lives in Waterville, Maine, acculturation is a given. It's not even something you stop to think about. White people are rarely in this cultural position. When they are in roughly the same situation, it's vacation, it's temporary. You know you can go back to the way things usually are," he says. "That's an oversimplification, but it is hard for the majority to do this without tremendous creativity."

For that reason Bryant approves of Colby's requirement that all students take courses to fulfill a "diversity" requirement. "It's a place to start," he says. And as one of a few African-American men on the faculty, Bryant is, like it or not, a role model. "An African-American male getting a Ph.D. in English from a fine graduate school doesn't happen easily," he says. "Over the last ten years, the average number of



where students are generally better off financially and academically and are not typically the first in their families to go to college, was something Bryant considered carefully. "I worried about abandoning the others," he says.

Finally, though, he heeded a long-standing infatuation. "It was New England," he says. "In high school I fell in love with the romantic idea of New England through reading a little bit too much Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson." Frost's poem "Birches" was especially influential. "I grew up in a part of Los Angeles with not many trees of any kind, and I was captivated by the idea of a white tree with specks of black in its trunk and green leaves. What in the world would that look like?" (At one time he also was enchanted by Frost's description of an ice storm, but he pretty much got over that during last January's storm.)

As important as Bryant's Eastern Washington job may have been to him and to those he taught, he also has had a profound impact on Colby students. What he refers to as "life-changing experiences" almost have to take place in a class studying a story like Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," about two girls, one

TAKES PLACE IN THE WINGS. IT'S ALL CENTER STAGE, HIM, SPEAKING IN LONG, RICHLY TEXTURED SENTENCES.

Ph.D.'s awarded to African-American males in literature and English was three a year. It was four or four point five for African-American women. Versus one hundred twenty for white women and ninety for white men. It's a ridiculous disparity.

"I had the benefit of graduate fellowships and wonderful mentors and a lot of good luck. And I believe the old African-American truism that what goes around comes around. If you believe that—or if you believe in karma—you accept the responsibility. I don't have a choice except to be a positive role model. . . . My students are going to be the bearers of culture, they are going to be in positions to either empower or disempower, to either move to the center or keep at the periphery groups of people, ideas, all kinds of things, in their formal and informal interactions with people, people who are different from them. That's why it's enormously important to me to be a positive influence in the lives of my students."

Bryant says he had some qualms about leaving his job at Eastern Washington in 1988; there, too, he had been a role model, and the position he filled was created to take advantage of his strengths. "My students were predominantly working class, students who in many instances were the first individuals in their extended families to go to college. And there were frequently students who were not well prepared academically, though there were very clearly demarcated areas of need, clear places where I could make a difference," he says. "I was constantly made to understand how important this moment was in their lives and how important a college degree was to them." Coming to Colby,

black and one white, who meet in an orphanage and keep encountering each other into their late 20s. "The reader never knows which is white, which black," Bryant says. "Morrison said she wanted to erase racial signifiers to show how important race is. . . . The reader is continually compelled to identify them racially. The act of doing that means you're calling on your own store of racial prejudices." When students discuss the story, "some assume they know who's what, and they are surprised to learn that others in the class don't share their views. They begin to talk about their prejudices. This is not an exercise in academic reading. This is about real-world experiences, and it's about ourselves."

Bryant and his wife, Gail, love living in Maine—though she is on the road sporadically for about eight months of the year as a consultant for a computer company based in Albany. "I like the Maine I've gotten to know," he says. "I like the people. They're honest and they're generous—especially to strangers. It's interesting; I see more interracial families in Maine than I ever did in Southern California."

He could have chosen to live anywhere, of course, but watching Bryant in the classroom you get the feeling that *this* is destiny, that his becoming a teacher was inevitable. He seems to think so, too.

"I'm conscious of my limitations and of all the things I don't do very well, which makes me motivated and desirous to pass on what I do know," Bryant says. "I was fortunate—really lucky—in discovering early on what I do best and in getting the kind of advanced education that qualified me to spend a lifetime doing the few things I do well." ♦