

Introduction

Multiethnic Literature in the Millennium

Mary Jo Bona and Irma Maini

In a 1999 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Scott Carlson discusses the implementation of “Great Books” programs in eleven colleges, with support from the National Association of Scholars, the Princeton-based group “known for its crusades against multiculturalism and political correctness” (18). In a subsequent report, “Losing the Big Picture: The Fragmentation of the English Major since 1964,” the National Association of Scholars were aghast to learn that Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston are now more frequently cited in course descriptions than Pope, Swift, Twain, and Poe (Eakin). In their attempt to offer students what they believe constitutes a solid foundation in Western thought, faculty members involved in such programs apply the Arnoldian maxim on criticism—“to know the best that is known and thought in the world”—to the teaching of the Great Books. In fact, some professors refuse to acknowledge political motivations undergirding the work of writers such as Thucydides and Machiavelli, promulgating a noncritical response to richly political works. Spouting the oft-heard reactionary response to recent literary criticism, one professor at Wright College in Chicago proclaims that “‘ideologies have no place as a dominant, controlling lens through which to see literature. . . . Literature has to do with the soul, not with political movements’” (qtd. in Carlson).

Disingenuous and alarming, such proclamations potentially suggest that examining literature cannot be a polysemous experience for students, whose souls may be inspired by political engagement. According to the Readers’ Guide to the Great Books of the Western World from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, an author’s work must be more than fifty years old to be included on the list

of books worthy to be read. Certainly in the past fifty years, the landscape of the American academy has undergone fundamental changes in its constituencies. Undergraduate female students now outnumber males, women and minority faculty members have been hired to teach in traditional English departments, and the study of American literature has been revitalized through republication and anthologizing of noncanonical works. Some Great Books programs have extended their study of Western works to include non-Western writers from Africa, East Asia, and South America (Carlson), but not surprisingly, multiethnic U.S. literature is excluded from consideration. Unfortunately, the cultural conflict about what constitutes literature worthy of examination is oversimplified, clearly dividing conservatives and liberals, as though no overlap exists. Many of us teaching multiethnic literature were raised on Shakespeare and Eliot, and have gladly taught many of the European-descended writers of the past. However, campus revivals of Great Books, criticism against multiculturalism, and excoriation of contemporary literature strongly compel those of us devoted to the dissemination and examination of multiethnic literature to revisit the ongoing debate on the expansion of the literary canon. As William Cain points out, "the 'canon' controversy not only involves choices among books, but also impels people to make decisions about the degree to which America's diverse population will be represented in institutional life" (3).

If the 1960s was characterized as a decade of social movements for change and justice, then the 1970s was surely the decade that witnessed the first fruits of those struggles. In the context of academia, scholarship, and teaching, many radical changes began to take place. One of the most significant tasks in the 1970s was the recovery of "lost" or "forgotten" texts by scholars. Feminist scholars in particular played a pivotal role in unearthing and republishing works like Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" ([1861]1971), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" ([1892]1973), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* ([1860]1973), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ([1937]1978), and scores of others. Other than reiterating the existence of women's

and blacks' literary traditions, republishing these works also brought into focus the social and sexual politics that had been largely responsible for the demise of these works in the past. Similarly works by writers of color like John Okada's *No-No Boy* ([1957]1976), D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1978), Jean Toomer's *Cane* ([1923]1975), and Jose Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* ([1959]1970) among others were given attention and republished. It was critical to establish the presence of these works as the process of redefining American literary history began in earnest.

In an ongoing effort to produce, distribute, and make available works by contemporary women and writers of color, and works that had been ignored or silenced in the past, academics and scholars put together several new anthologies. Keenly aware of the nexus of publication and accessibility of texts, scholars saw the importance of anthologies and rightly believed that in many ways anthologies were key to bringing about change in syllabi and reading lists. Some of the most significant anthologies in the 1970s were: Abraham Chapman (ed.) *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature* (1972); Luiz Valdez and Stan Steiner (eds.) *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (1972); Frank Chin, et al. (eds.) *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974); Mary Helen Washington (ed.) *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975); and Alan Velie (ed.) *American Indian Literature: An Anthology* (1979). Each of these anthologies contributed to the growing need and demand for a body of literature that was conspicuously absent in the influential and popular *Norton Anthology* through much of the 1970s. For instance, only one African American writer, Le Roi Jones (Amiri Baraka) was given the last two pages of the 1,906 page *Norton Anthology* (Hemenway 65), thus underscoring the relationship between hegemonic control and distribution of knowledge.

Gradually, publishers both large and small started publishing more works by minority writers, some who have gained canonical status today. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography*

of *Miss Jane Pittman* (1972) were published by major houses like A. A. Knopf and Random House. On the other hand, several small and independent presses like The Feminist Press and Broadside Press dedicated themselves to publishing works by minority writers. Quinto Sol publishers did much to promote Chicano literature and published Tomás Rivera's . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Part* (1971); Rudolfo A. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972); and Rolando Hinojosa's *Estampas del valle y otras obras: Sketches of the Valley and other Works* (1973). These authors later came to be known as the "Chicano Big Three."

With the publication of a large number of works by women and ethnic writers, it was inevitable that there would be a growth in the scholarship and research of these writers and their works. The 1970s saw the emergence of new critical methodologies as scholars questioned the validity of imposing so-called universal critical paradigms on works by "minority" writers. Recognizing the patriarchal and/or Eurocentric assumptions as well as the underlying hegemonic structures of many of these tools of inquiry, critics sought to formulate diverse strategies that would allow them to take into account differences in gender, race, ethnicity, class, culture, location, and sexual preference. Some of the groundbreaking work in this area began with theorizing vernacular and oral traditions, narrative and language, folklore and myth, genre and form. Addison Gayle's *Black Aesthetic* (1971), and Robert Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979) started this process, which gained momentum in the 1980s with Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and African American Literature* (1984), and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988). Critical anthologies of essays like Joseph Sommers and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (eds.) *Modern Chicano Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1979), and Charles R. Larson (ed.) *American Indian Fiction* (1978) helped theorize and contextualize works by Chicano and Native American writers.

Scholars and academics who were engaged in the rereading and reinterpreting of canonical works as well as analyzing and theorizing contemporary works needed the network and support of academic organizations. However, instead of lending support,

premier organizations like the MLA used highhanded tactics to silence the demands of its "radical" members to present their research and ideas. A case from the annals of MLA convention history comes to mind: one of the foremost leaders in the movement to bring to the academic table issues on the Vietnam War and the repression of students and blacks, Paul Lauter (along with Louis Kampf and Florence Howe among others) disrupted the 1968 MLA convention. Seeking an expansion of focus which included discussion of the Vietnam War and the repression of authors Eldridge Cleaver and Octavio Paz, Lauter and others fought the MLA stalwarts of the organization to include the establishment of a Commission on the Status of Women and a reconsideration of the practice of aestheticism to include analysis of black, Chicano, and women writers. As Kampf and Lauter attested, "literature and literary practice, in spite of the intentions of the practitioners of aestheticism, are weapons in maintaining or transforming the received order of social relations" (*The Politics of Literature* 41).

Eventually in 1976, the MLA established a Committee on Minority Literature and organized a series of seminars in African American literature and Native American literature that "began the process of 'decentering' the canon, redefining American literature and literary history" (Singh et al. 4). This also led to the publications of four important volumes by the MLA: Dexter Fisher (ed.) *Minority Language and Literature* (1977); Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto (eds.) *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (1979); Houston A. Baker, Jr. (ed.) *Three American Literatures: Essays in Chicano, Native American, and Asian American Literatures for Teachers of American Literature* (1982); and Paula Gunn Allen (ed.) *Studies in American Indian Literature* (1983) (Singh et al. 14). Meanwhile several academic organizations and groups like MELUS (Multiethnic Literature of the United States), AAAS (Association for Asian American Studies), and AIHA (American Italian Historical Association) were formed and established. Likewise there was a spurt of new scholarly journals and periodicals like *Amerasia*, *Callaloo*, *African American Review*, *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, *MELUS*, and others that provided space for scholars in these fields to publish their research.

Demands to make curricula, syllabi, and reading lists more democratic, inclusive, and pluralistic gained currency in the 1970s though arguments about canons became a national debate primarily in the 1980s. Critics and academics questioned the criteria used to determine literary value, criteria that usually included vague notions of aesthetic excellence and universality. They asked: "What is excellence?" "Who determines it?" "Whose reality/truth is universal?" Urging a redefinition of the criteria and the evaluative process, scholars grappled with the difficult and complex task of deciding which works should be studied and taught, researched and critiqued. Paul Lauter asserts that the questions of the 1960s: "Where are the blacks?" "Where are the women?" shifted to "Whom do you want to replace?" in the 1970s (*Canons* 7–8). This was a potent question, particularly for those who saw this as an attempt not to replace but to displace "canonical" writers. Despite changes in reading lists and scholarship, literature by women and writers of color was by and large separated and ghettoized in much of the 1970s. Most academics did not see this literature as an integral part of the mainstream curriculum and preferred to relegate it to "specialty" courses or programs. Others attempted to include a token writer or two in their reading lists, usually to be taught at the end of the term. More than just the practical reason that not many professors were trained to teach these "new" works, this marginalization of minority literature was yet another way to dismiss and invalidate it on the grounds that it lacked aesthetic value and had a purely political and ideological agenda.

Nevertheless, the small and big gains of the 1970s unsettled a large group of people—both inside and outside of academia—and caused enough alarm among them that brought about a backlash in the 1980s, spearheaded by the publication of Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, and E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. Intellectuals in academia did not anticipate the far-reaching effects of such books, but conservatives working in the 1980s for the Reagan Administration, including the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, and formerly William Bennett, who became secretary of education under Reagan, advocated a return to the classics, "defending a body of knowledge that should constitute a stable curriculum, expressing humanistic

wisdom—expressing, indeed, the highest aspirations of the Western tradition—against the onslaughts of the new barbarians” (Gilbert and Gubar xiv, xv). An approach to literature that was committed to established classics—an immutable canon—was debated in many venues, “From *Newsweek* and *Time* to *The New Criterion* and *The American Scholar*, low-, middle-, and high-brow magazines featured articles caricaturing or lambasting an academy we hardly recognized from our own experience” (Gilbert and Gubar xii). For academics committed to opening the canon and introducing students to marginalized literary cultures, the culture wars of the 1980s—“these war whoops”—as Gilbert and Gubar describe them, “were impinging on our lives as writers, readers, and teachers, no matter how we tried to ignore them” (xii).

Undoubtedly, canon debates came into vogue in the 1980s. Many in academia engaged strenuously in debates about *the* canon, a topic not of much interest until movements for social change in the 1960s and 1970s shifted and diversified the academic landscape. Professors in literature departments seemed divided on the issue of canons. Did expanding the canon mean that *the* masterpieces would remain untaught? On one side of the divide were the canon expanders, who wanted to consider the “transformation of perception” that occurs when a “traditional category is shattered by adding a range of different works to prior accounts of it” (Lauter, *Reconstructing* xxiii). On the other side were advocates of a Hirschian “cultural literacy,” placing faith in an objective reality of greatness, which included a cultural canon already ensconced.

Alongside the debates about literary canons in the American academy came important attempts to define the critical term itself. According to Wendell Harris, citing a biblical parallel when discussing literary canons is inappropriate despite the word’s core meaning of “rule” or “measure,” “and by extrapolation, ‘correct’ or ‘authoritative,’ . . . the process of biblical canonizing was toward closure, whereas literary canons have always implicitly allowed for at least the possibility of adding new or revalued works” (110, 111). In his analysis of the canon and the Hebrew Scriptures, however, Gerald Bruns reminds us that the biblical canon is not “a literary category but a category of power” (81). Ongoing heated discussion ensued regarding considerations of

the literary canon, especially during the 1980s. Such conversations often resulted in polemics rather than “critical colloquy” (Harris 112). Suggesting that feminist challenges to the literary canon have been intrinsically but refreshingly polemical, Lillian Robinson also put forth the radical idea that including women’s writing “alters” our view of the traditional canon (213).

John Guillory has described the canon debate as an argument for opening the canon, or the liberal critique, and the argument for preserving the canon, or the conservative critique. Lost in both arguments, according to Guillory, is historical context. Believing that the question of judgment, of aesthetic value, is the wrong question to raise with regard to canons, Guillory reminds readers that “an individual’s judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the *reproduction* of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers” (237). Those of us in academia know that the institution of the school has organized and regulated our practices of reading (Guillory 239). And perhaps the best description of the word “canon” comes from an awareness of the social function of the academy and its distribution of knowledge (Guillory 240). Paul Lauter has sought to understand canon formation in its historical context, recognizing the relationship between the history of the school and literacy itself. Awareness of what is “central” and what is “marginal” to literary study is a basic function of canonization, argues Lauter, but *who* decides these categories determines “who studies, who teaches, and who has power in determining priorities in American colleges” (*Canons and Contexts* ix). Like the biblical canon, therefore, the literary canon is about power.

Offering a definition of the word “canon,” is never a neutral undertaking. Lauter’s definition continues to be useful after the canon wars of the 1980s have been putatively laid to rest because a “classic” text continues to be a category that is reinforced by academics in power. Keeping in mind Lauter’s working definition of canon allows those of us teaching ethnic literature and multicultural works in English departments and programs such as Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies to remember that such books

less than a generation ago were not considered worthy to teach. Lauter writes, "by 'canon' I mean the set of literary works, the grouping of significant philosophical, political, and religious texts, the particular accounts of history generally accorded cultural weight within a society. How one defines a cultural canon obviously shapes collegiate curricula and research priorities, but it also helps to determine precisely whose experiences and ideas become central to academic study" (*Canons and Contexts* ix). Such a definition has serious import for the future of the academy and for the teaching of multiethnic literature. Lillian Robinson earlier recalled that the whole effort of maintaining a traditional literary canon has been hardly a conspiracy by the academic elite. Nonetheless, people in academia use power consciously, and defenders of a traditional canon reinforce the status quo by teaching primarily white and masculine works. Moreover, if we think of the traditional literary canon as a "gentlemanly artifact" then we recognize that the process of expanding it has as much to do with diversifying academe as it has to do with textbook availability (Robinson 213).

Entering the controversy about the canon during the height of the literary culture wars of the 1980s, Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose admitted that they could not predict "who will be tomorrow's canon-makers and common readers, only that they will surely contest each other's right to own, and define, culture" (xix). Citing a 1987 position paper issued by the National Endowment for the Humanities (authored by Lynne Cheney) on the grim situation in the nation's public schools, Kaplan and Rose illuminate the dichotomous nature of the culture debate between the conservatives and the liberals, in effect echoing the concerns of Lauter and others at the 1968 MLA convention. The conservative authors of the NEH document, according to Kaplan and Rose, "are committed to timeless, eternal 'classics' that institutionalize and ossify the world they already control" (3). Recognizing that reevaluating the canon is "neither revolutionary nor unprecedented," Kaplan and Rose reiterate a basic premise of canon reformation: it is an "organic and ongoing process" (10). As such, multiethnic literature, like women's literature, challenges the "academic establishment to examine its ideological premises and alter existing power relations" (13).

Meanwhile the 1980s saw a huge influx of works by women, writers of color, and voices that had been silenced or ignored over the years, including gay/lesbian writers. It is no exaggeration to state that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), which won the Pulitzer the following year, "placed the entire group [of black women writers] within a new dimension in the national consciousness" (McKay 249). In fact, 1987 and 1988 were enormously auspicious years for black writers, several of whom won the Pulitzer: August Wilson for his play, *Fences* (1987); Rita Dove for her poetry collection, *Thomas and Beulah* (1987); and Toni Morrison for her novel, *Beloved* (1988). In addition, the National Book Critics Circle awarded its annual prize to Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), and Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). Not only did works like these make it to the *New York Times* best seller list but those like Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* also remained on the list for forty weeks. The year 1988 also saw the immense popularity of David Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, which won the Tony that year and was selected as a finalist for the Pulitzer in 1989. The public appetite for more multiethnic works paralleled the student demand for changes in syllabi and curriculum across campuses. Not coincidentally, Werner Sollors published his landmark study *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* in 1986, furthering a wide-ranging exploration of "the origins and ambiguities of the term 'ethnicity,'" itself, thereby reinforcing the pluralistic origins of American literary culture (18). In addition, one of the major publishing events that further helped to propel this appetite for multiethnic works was the first edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* in 1989. The first anthology to include a multiplicity of voices and genres, the *Heath* played a pivotal role in canon expansion and transformation. Greeted with both cheers and jeers, the *Heath* added more fodder to the raging cultural wars of the 1980s. It aroused the ire of Roger Kimball, the editor of the *New Criterion*, who declared it to be "a shabby production, intellectually shallow, politically tendentious" and asserted that "it deserves the scorn of everyone who cares about the preservation and transmission of American literature" (qtd. in Cain 8).

The process of decolonizing the literary canon gained further momentum with the growth of postcolonial studies in the late

1980s and much of the 1990s. As Salah Hassan points out, "Post-colonial studies, notably in the form of colonial discourse analysis, formulated a critique of the canon by exposing the traces of empire and the construction of a colonial object in canonical texts" (300). Though Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) had brought into focus the hegemony of the colonial discourse in literature and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* had won the Booker prize in 1981, it was only after the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, that postcolonial studies took off. Even as critics and scholars continued to wrestle with the term 'postcolonial,' theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, among others, laid the groundwork for postcolonial theory and discourse that not only challenged underlying assumptions of current theories, but also showed new and interesting ways of analyzing literature.

Discussions of sexuality and identity also gained momentum, spearheaded by pioneering anthologies such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, and *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (1982), edited by Evelyn Toron Beck, to name just two. Such collections, as Martha Vicinus explains, "problematized the contemporary relationship between a lesbian identity and a racial identity in the United States" (433). Reading about sexual identity necessitated an awareness of the various and complicated ways in which sexuality intertwined with cultural identity, social class, and regional background. In their collection, Anzaldúa and Moraga not only called attention to racism within the feminist movement, but they also paved the way for future writers to expand on concepts of feminism, queerness, and multiple identities. Creating a mixed-genre work such as her 1987 *Borderlands—La Frontera: The New Mestiza* testified to Anzaldúa's construction of a generic montage that deepened an understanding of marginalized identity be it national, racial, linguistic or sexual, centralizing borderlands writing in critical discourse. Committed to collective subjectivity, many gay/lesbian writers create works that complicate the intersection between sexual and cultural identities. For example, Norman Wong's 1994 collection of short stories *Cultural Revolution* portrays

several generations of immigrants, and Carole Maso's 1986 debut novel *Ghost Dance* explores the multiple ethnic roots of her protagonist's family. Both works redefine multiethnicity, and challenge readers and scholars alike to explore the relationships between narrative experimentalism—genre mixing—and issues of cultural hybridity, sexual difference, and national identity.

Despite the radical developments in scholarship, perhaps because of them, the two previously mentioned jeremiads *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom, and *Cultural Literacy* by E. D. Hirsch became best sellers in the 1980s. Each advocated educational reform through a "revival of a conservative system of education" (Simonson ix). In response to Bloom and Hirsch, the editors of *Graywolf Annual* collected essays that were mostly written before the appearance of either Bloom's or Hirsch's books, by such writers as James Baldwin, Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Wendell Berry. In doing so, these editors reinforced the fact that for many years authors have thought and written about "issues of multiculturalism, the history of civilizations, feminist literature and culture, ethnicity, and the literature and histories of non-White and non-European cultures" (Simonson xiiii). Perhaps the reason why "cultural literacy" quickly gained such wide currency in the 1980s was because "it seem[ed] to offer a simple solution to urgent problems. As with all quick fixes, this promise [was] deceptive" (Armstrong 29). Such urgent problems as reading deficiencies in elementary school children and a weak economy could not be solved by requiring students to learn a "national vocabulary" as promulgated by E. D. Hirsch in the 1980s (qtd. in Armstrong 27). Rather than focus solely on finding common ground based on memorization of vocabulary (as important as that is), Paul Armstrong suggests that we teach competing narratives in order to learn "what to do [linguistically] when we find an absence of commonality" in a pluralistic society (32). Certainly the nation's schools in the 1990s and beyond are still suffering from lack of resources and unequal distribution of funding sources that leave the nation's poorest students unable either to memorize or to make meanings of their own.

The new millennium has brought a mixed bag in terms of literary culture. The resurgence of book clubs (Oprah's club of the

1990s being the most popular and powerful) compelled a rethinking about the common reader and literary novels. The resurgence of Great Books courses and its accompanying audiotapes in contrast reinforced the idea of a transcendent notion of greatness. Alongside these two divergent responses to literature aimed at a reading public outside academe, inspiring literary events took place inside the academy. The fourth edition of *Heath Anthology* was published. The most multiethnic of all the American literary anthologies, *Heath* continues to define American literature through the lens of multiethnic voices. John Alberti, one of the editors of the *Heath*, asserts "revising the canon of American literature and developing multicultural curricula . . . represent not just a rethinking of what texts to include on a syllabus, or the simple replacement of one group of privileged texts with another, but a fundamental re-examination of the purposes and practices of literary study as a whole and of American literature in particular" (Pedagogical xv). Further, this rethinking, Alberti points out is also necessary in examining the different pedagogical strategies in teaching multiethnic literatures (*Canon* xii)

Though traditionally more conservative, the *Norton Anthology* has also refocused its energies in recent editions by including voices of many cultures alongside the formerly dominant Anglo-American culture. While recognizing the significance of the material conditions of the distribution of a work, Susan Gallagher argues for the primacy of the "'pedagogical canon': texts that are taught in college and university settings," (54) over an "imaginary canon," a term she borrows from Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Asserting that "the literary canon is a loose, baggy monster, a fluid movement of ebbs and flows, ins and outs," Gallagher asks: "Will untaught texts eventually disappear from the imaginary canon? Can a text be canonical if no one teaches it?" (66). However, the process of what remains in the canon and what gets taught is a complex one as Judith Fetterley points out in her important anthology of early American women writers. Works gain cultural credence through ceaseless discussion and through publication in various forums. Such evidence includes a "nutrient mass of critical books and articles, scholarly biographies, exhaustive bibliographies, special and regular MLA sessions, hundreds of discussions in hundreds

of classrooms, cheap and accessible paperback editions, richly elegant coffee-table editions, government-funded standard text editions." Such apparatus, Fetterley explains, testifies to the presumed worthiness of such texts to be fed (34).

Increasingly books that are now available in many editions and boast a generous scholarly response are multiethnic in content. Since the mid-to-late 1980s works such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* have become household names in English departments. In fact, these works, and others like them, are reprinted in multiple venues, including the canon-shaping anthology, *Heath* and the highly expanded, *Norton*. Scholars who teach multiethnic literature are instrumental in shaping the future of this body of texts.

Recognizing the shift in focus in canon debates in the 1990s, Gregory Jay explains that "revisionists now face many thorny questions about what to do in the wake of the end of consensus and the advent of multiculturalism" (6). Recent critical discourse about multiethnic literature has enriched the conversation about literary value, offering current formulations on such issues as contact zones, borderlands, and hybridity that supports the idea that all texts have contexts and all of them are about cultural contact with other modes of being and behavior. Both unsettling and exciting is the fact that those newly entering the debate on canonicity in the millennium are inheriting canon reform, not necessarily making it. Those new to the field of multiethnic literature are encouraged to enhance recent scholarship by examining such concerns as the category of identity itself, which gains further resonance in texts that focus on cultural hybridity, racial and ethnic crossing, and sexual identification.

The ten scholars represented in this book present useful and innovative ways to examine literary works in various stages of canonization. Recognizing the significance of studying the social, political, and literary history of multiethnic literatures, writers in part I of the anthology critically examine the reception and dissemination of ethnic literatures in their essays. In her essay, "From the Road not Taken to the Multi-Lane Highway: *MELUS*: The

Journal," Veronica Makowsky examines the development of multiethnic literature from the perspective of one of the preeminent academic journals in the discipline, *MELUS* (Multiethnic Literature of the United States). Evaluating the increasingly complex theoretical approaches used to introduce and discuss multiethnic literature, Makowsky is able to assess the wide-ranging diversity of the field thirty years after its inception. Aureliano Maria DeSoto's essay "On the Trail of the Chicana/o Subject: Literary Texts and Contexts in the Formation of Chicana/o Studies" traces the role of cultural and identity politics in the history of Chicana/o studies and the canonization of Chicano texts within the context of the polemics of the Chicano movement of the mid-1960s as well as the feminist, lesbian, and gay critique in the mid-1970s to the present. DeSoto argues that the current debate about the status of Chicana/o studies is a sign of healthy and productive involvement of Chicana/o activists, scholars, and intellectuals that points toward a more discursive and dialectic approach. A critical overview of the absence of Native American literature in popular anthologies since 1891 to the end of the 1980s is the subject of Kristin Czarnecki's essay "'A House Made with Stones / Full of Stories': Anthologizing Native American Literature." Drawing on theories of cultural capital and the production and distribution of literature, Czarnecki examines the impact of the exclusion of Native American works in anthologies until the publication of the *Heath* in 1989 and the subsequent revision of the *Norton Anthology*.

The essays in part II of the anthology analyze the issue of canonization of specific texts within the context of the politics of literary, aesthetic, and/or social value. Mary Jo Bona's essay, "'But is it Great?': The Question of the Canon for Italian American Women Writers" places Italian American women writers into the larger context of American literature by examining the development of the American literary canon in the early twentieth century. Introducing those critics responsible for placing Italian American writers on the literary map, Bona explores texts and themes that resonate an *italianità* distinct to this cultural group but also reverberating with other American works. In his essay, "Racial Politics and the Literary Reception of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Stephen Spencer discusses the checkered

history of Hurston's now famous novel. Despite the racial and gendered controversy surrounding Hurston's work, Spencer's essay shows the remarkable manner in which feminist and cultural critics retrieved the text and contributed to the current canonical status of the novel. Joe Kraus's essay "De-Centering the Canon: Understanding *The Great Gatsby* as an Ethnic Novel" engages a canonical text and reinterprets it by using theories and tools traditionally used to study ethnic texts. Focusing largely on the issue of "outsiderness," on "real" or perceived differences between the terms immigrant, ethnic, and American, Kraus's essay reveals the complex and deep connections between these markers of identity. In her essay "An Exile's Will to Canon and Its Tension with Ethnicity: Li-Young Lee," Wenying Xu examines Chinese American poet, Li-Young Lee, whose disavowal of ethnic community in favor of an identification with American transcendentalism is his effort to will himself—as the poet of exile—into the canon of American poetry. Despite his positioning as displaced and homeless, Li-Young Lee invokes, as Xu demonstrates, his Asian culture's foodways and stories.

Any discussion of multiethnic literature must necessarily address its place and status in popular culture. No longer can academia be the proverbial ivory tower separated from the concerns of the outside world. In fact, one might argue that multiethnic literature has been largely responsible for bridging the gap between "high brows" and "low brows." June Dwyer addresses this issue in her essay "Canon-Openers, Book Clubs, and Middlebrow Culture" in the third section of this anthology. Historicizing the existence of book clubs, Dwyer's essay examines the role of popular book clubs like Book-of-the-Month club and Oprah's book club in opening up the traditional literary canon. Sarika Chandra examines the question of a literary canon from a totally different perspective in her essay "From the Boardroom to Cocktail Parties: 'Great' Books, Multiethnic Literature, and the Production of the Professional Managerial Class in the Context of Globalization." Drawing on theories of Pierre Bourdieu and John Guillory, Chandra's essay examines the marketing of literary texts, "Great Books" as well as multiethnic works, to the professional managerial class and its effect on the literary canon. In her essay, "It's Just

Beginning: Assessing the Impact of the Internet on U.S. Multiethnic Literature and the 'Canon,'" Patricia Keefe Durso analyzes the way the Internet is dramatically reshaping literary and critical texts. Seeing a convergence between the web-based paradigm of multilinearity, multivocality and the text based nonlinear, non-hierarchical paradigm in multiethnic works, Durso's essay contends that the Internet is, perhaps, an ideal medium for the dissemination of multiethnic literature. As the innovative fiction writer Carole Maso explains, "electronic writing will help us to think about impermanence, facility, fragility, and freedom, spatial intensities, irreverences, experimentation, new worlds, clean slates. Print writing will allow us new respect for the mark on the page, the human hand, the erasure, the hesitation, the mistake" (173). Multiethnic literature—electronic and print—portrays American identities in multiple contexts and enriching complexity. Providing fruitful discussion about this literature paves the way for future canonization, which such scholarship encourages, but with clear-sighted awareness of the changing nature of canon formation itself.

Throughout the decade of 2000, issues about the value and necessity of disseminating multiethnic literature persist. Negative attitudes regarding the teaching and reading of ethnically diverse American writers continue to inspire heated discussion about the literary value of multiethnic works. Though Jessica Munns dramatically declares: "the canon is dead: long live pick and mix" (26), the debates go on. In fact, canon debates are certainly not meant to be resolved. As Susan Gallagher succinctly states, "canon formation is an imprecise process" (54). Engaging in strenuous debates on the efficacy of multiethnic literature in a time of conservative ideals suggests that "The Little Bourgeois Cultural Revolution of MLA 1968" that Paul Lauter and his cohorts initiated needs to be revitalized in the millennium (*The Politics of Literature* 34). In order to challenge a narrow understanding of what we read and how we read it, readers of multiethnic literature in America recognize that literature—all of it—must be read in all its complex contexts. The essays that follow show us how to do it: to read literature soulfully and mindfully, in tandem.

Works Cited

- Alberti, John, ed. *The Canon in the Classroom: The Pedagogical Implications of Canon Revision in American Literature*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- . "Pedagogical Introduction." *Instructor's Guide. The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 4th ed. Ed. John Alberti. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. xv–xviii.
- Armstrong, Paul B. "Pluralistic Literacy." *Profession* (1988): 29–32.
- Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.
- Bona, Mary Jo. "Gay and Lesbian Writing in Post-World War II America." *A Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Josephine G. Hendin. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 210–237.
- Bruce-Novoa, Juan. "Canonical and Noncanonical Texts: A Chicano Case Study." *Redefining American Literary History*. Eds. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. New York: MLA, 1990. 196–209.
- Bruns, Gerald L. "Canon and Power in the Hebrew Scriptures." *Canons*. Ed. Robert von Hallberg. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. 65–83.
- Cain, William E. "Opening the American Mind: Reflections on the 'Canon' Controversy." *Canon vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*. Ed. Jan Gorak. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001. 3–16.
- Carlson, Scott. "A Campus Revival for the Great Books." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 19 (November 1999): A18–.
- Eakin, Emily. "More Ado (Yawn) About Great Books." *The New York Times* 8 April 2001: 4A.
- Fetterley, Judith, ed. *Provisions: A Reader from 19th-Century American Women*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Gallagher, Susan VanZanten. "Contingencies and Intersections: The Formation of Pedagogical Canons." *Pedagogy* 1.1 (2001): 53–67.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *Masterpiece Theatre: An Academic Melodrama*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Graff, Gerald. *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992.
- Guillory, John. "Canon." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. 233–249.

- Harris, Wendell V. "Canonicity." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 110–121.
- Hassan, Salah D. "Canons after 'Postcolonial Studies'." *Pedagogy* 1.2 (2001): 297–304
- Hemenway, Robert. "In the American Canon." *Redefining American Literary History*. Eds. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. New York: MLA, 1990. 62–72.
- Hirsch, E. D. Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Jay, Gregory S. *American Literature and the Canon Wars*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Kampf, Louis and Paul Lauter, eds. Introduction. *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. 3–54.
- Kaplan, Carey and Ellen Cronan Rose. *The Canon and the Common Reader*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.
- Lauter, Paul. *Canons and Contexts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- , ed. *Reconstructing American Literature: Courses, Syllabi, Issues*. New York: Feminist Press, 1983.
- Maso, Carole. *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, & Moments of Desire*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000.
- McKay, Nellie. "Reflections on Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991. 249–261.
- Munns, Jessica. "Canon Fodder: Women's Studies and the (British) Literary Canon." *Canon vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*. Ed. Jan Gorak. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001. 17–27.
- Robinson, Lillian S. "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991. 212–226.
- Simonson, Rick and Scott Walker, eds. Introduction. *Multi-Cultural Literacy*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1988. ix–xv.
- Singh, Amritjit, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, eds. Introduction. *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1994. 3–25
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Vicinus, Martha. "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. 432–452.