

Writing Multicultural America: The Powers of Canon and Ethnicity

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Abstract

America has long and vigorously been taken up with the issue of cultural identity, the one and the many. Its literary authorship, Puritans to Postmoderns, has been no less so engaged. Who gets to say what writing best speaks for the culture? Has there been a preemptive strike in which a largely white, male, protestant body of voice is taken to preside? With the 1960s and the culture-wars the terms of debate radically altered. A whole-scale revision of who speaks, who writes, who is to be listened to, and who (and what) is to be taught, has been talking place. The language, often warring, has been that of canon and multiculturalism, mainstream and periphery, a one 'agreed' hierarchy of imaginative expression as against a huge and actually long ethnic plurality of idiom and memory. The differing claimants have been many and vociferous. This essay addresses the issues in some fullness. It looks again at the various working terms of reference, and then at what in the past has gone into the formation of the American literary canon. There follows a selective analysis of four multicultural arenas—Native America, Afro-America, Latino/a America and Asian America.

Keywords: multicultural, canon, ethnicity, whiteness, native, African American, Latino/a, Asian American, transnational, pluralism

Multicultural America. Canon. Ethnicity. Together they constitute no small mouthful. Each comes freighted in offence and defence, embattlement, and in few greater contexts than the American 1960s as change-era with, in its turn, the ensuing so-called Culture Wars. The cry had gone up. Identity politics was to have its long-overdue redress, ethnic, feminist, gay, disabled: no pre-emptive one America but multi-America. To tackle even selectively the literary authorship involved, the extraordinary surge and interlace of narrative, verse, theatre, life and discursive writing, and popular culture, requires both general compass and necessary particularity of voice. No small challenge.

It is hardly a historical secret that from the outset America has been taken up with national-cultural identity, the one and the many. Its literary roster, Puritans to the Postmoderns, together with those who set up working judgements, has been wholly implicated in the process. Who gets to say what writing best speaks for the culture? What most determines canon formation? How did it come about that a supposed ascendancy was taken to have emerged, largely Anglo-white, male, and/or protestant, an as-of-right WASP hegemony? Counter-reckoning, and accompanying ideology, has increasingly taken upon itself to unpick this order of things. In play have been issues of inclusion and exclusion, who has hitherto not been heard or distributed, and never least, who is to be included in the college and classroom syllabus.

The language in play indeed turns on canon and multiculturalism, mainstream and periphery, a one 'agreed' hierarchy of imaginative expression as against America's huge and actually long-historic ethnic plurality of idiom and memory. The different claimants have been urgent, uninhibited, to include questioning the actual necessity for any single determinative canon. Have the bulwarks, the very sinew, of expressive American culture come under threat or is a new dispensation long overdue with time called on elitism, self-privileging cultural status? The polemic has gone back and forth, perhaps as symptomatically as anywhere in a pairing like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), with its lament for threatened High Culture, as against Lawrence W. Levine's *The Opening of The American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (1996), with its call to embrace cultural width and plurality.

Other contextual cross-argument can look to, say, Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1999), conservative misgivings at alleged cultural balkanization and pc, and at a counter-reach, Desmond King's *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of Diverse Democracy* (2000), the case for salutation of transnational cultural America. As to 'writing multicultural America', the measures have been equally many, whether Henry Louis Gates's *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1992) as working *tour d'horizon*, or Ishmael Reed's *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace* (1998), an anthology given over to a changed and still-changing America's literary-cultural regimen.

As useful a point of departure as any might well be is the term America itself. The nomenclature has long settled into canonical usage. It signifies the United States of America, North America, the US, a once-and-for-all register for territory that had earlier been apportioned into *New England*, *Nouvelle France*, *Nueva España*. Quickly enough, and allowing for every nuance in the process, there emerges what in his *Public Opinion* (1922) Walter Lippman termed "the manufacture of consent". That is: there would be an agreed or institutional America, compositely Anglo, English-speaking, Christian, hetero, and whatever the romance of a frontier and farm also a nation replete in nuclear family and the comforts of suburb and consumer goods. Frequently enough 'America' is taken to incorporate Canada (it would be intriguing to imagine

the reverse) though not the wider hemisphere of the Americas, both Latin or South America and the Caribbean.

This, inevitably, brings up the issue of whiteness, not simply as hue or coloration, but as cultural quantity, yet-more-vexed terrain in the canon–multiculture axis. A useful coordinate as to the whiteness at issue can be met with in Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness* (1998):

Whiteness is a created identity ... sustained through hegemony, a complex network of cultural relations including, among other things, literature, museums, popular culture, and movies. (1998, 4-5)

This succinct formulation easily finds support and embodiment. Think of the 'face' of America, be it the founding patriarchs, or First Families from George and Martha Washington to, say, the Bushes, father and sons. Summon the outward visage, and the shelves of position and class behind each, of the Daughters of the American Revolution or the Daughters of the American Confederacy. Give eye to Hollywood, from charismatic John Wayne cowboy to Jean Harlow (the original 'Blond Bombshell') and Marilyn Monroe as Bodies Beautiful, or step back yet further to the white-race Klan zealotry of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) with its footfall in the film version of *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Leading TV presenters, news or late night, have until relatively recently shown a single coloration. Latterly movements like *English Only* and *Official English* supply reminders that there needs be a 'white' English uncontaminated by Spanish (albeit that the USA is variously estimated as the second- or fifth-largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world), or Black English, or code-switching.

This supposedly presiding version slides easily over Native America, African America, Hispano-America, Asian America, mixed-ethnic America, not to mention much of Gay, LBGT, Transgender, and even child America. It also does not reflect, or address, the massive plurality or multiplicity of white ethnicities, from the WASP upper reaches to the suburban middle class to so-called white-trash/trailer-trash versions, be the latter inner-city poor or dirt-scrabble Appalachian rural hill communities. Does 'white' do duty for all conjugations, Jewish, Scandinavian, German, white-Latino/a, or Mediterranean? In this connection it comes to mind that the Irish (think Huck Finn's father) and the Italians and Greeks were once considered not white, or not white enough. A requisite bibliography has built up, symptomatically Theodore Allen's conspectus in *The Invention of the White Race* (1994), and case-specific studies like Matthew Frye Jacobson's anatomy of Jewish America in *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1999), Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish became White* (1995) and Fred Gadarrhé's *Italian Signs, Italian Streets* (1996). There is also more than passing relevance in the controversy stirred by Shelley Fisher Fishkin in *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* (1993) over the likelihood that the voice of iconic American boyhood was actually speaking an English rooted in African American vernacular.

The link to issues of American literary canon arises readily enough. In the eras since the 1960s we have begun to think differently. Where more so than in the best known of US literary anthologies, the Norton anthologies, the transition from virtually all-white authorship to multicultural inclusions. Two sightlines give a further bearing. *Time Magazine*, with its WASP patriarchal and matriarchal ancestry in Henry Luce and Claire Booth Luce, found itself taking note of the changes. A review of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), if a touch condescendingly, was able to observe:

Growing up ethnic is surely the liveliest theme to appear in the American novel since the closing of the frontier. (John Skow, *Time Magazine*, 27 March, 1989)

Eric Liu, Chinese American autobiographer and essayist, and in an echo of James Baldwin's landmark *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), offers a laconic comment in *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* (1998) as he attacks "Model Minority" patronage by the assumed cultural High Command:

Times have changed, and I suppose you would call it progress that a Chinaman, too, may now aspire to whiteness. (1998, 35)

Canonicity in American literature looks to a complex lineage, so a sexual reference adds more than a touch of spice. Where more so than within the wonderful japery of John Donne's metaphysical classic "To His Mistress Going to Bed":

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, above, between, below.
O my America! My new-found-land....

The erotica, sadly, for present purposes must take second place to that resonant phrase "new-found-land". There the marker points to exceptionalism, America as inaugurating a new dispensation of self and society, a world to make its own providential and nothing-if-not-unique cultural desiderata and rules. Other equally celebrated touchstones add their weight, from John Winthrop's City upon a Hill ("the eyes of all people are upon us") in his *Model of Christian Charity* (1630), to Emerson's "original relation to the universe" in *Nature* (1836), to Fitzgerald's "fresh green breast of the new world" so lyrically memorialized at the close of *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The implication is one of millennial prospect, with a literature conceived to match.

But any due or established canon did not come easily. There would be the Rev. Sydney Smith, founder of the *Edinburgh Review*, asking in 1820 "[i]n the four corners of the globe who reads an American book?". Henry James in his *Hawthorne* (1879) would speak of "the absent things in American life" ("no literature, no novels, no pictures, no political society"), even if the novelist William Dean Howells responded that all that remained was America. Which is not to doubt that America looked to a species of national or pageant texts, prime among them Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1771–90) as American self-help credo, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) as abolitionist banner, and, over time, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1894) with the arterial Mississippi river as backdrop to the nation's boyhood classic. But only from the 1920s onward can it be said that a working canon came to be fully canvassed and then more or less installed, the upshot of key polemical texts like Lewis Mumford's *The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture* (1926), Van Wyck Brooks's *The Flowering of New England, 1815–1865* (1936), and perhaps the most seminally, F.O. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941).

The names summoned are now wholly familiar: Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville and Hawthorne. Each, rightly enough, bears a strong signature, a duly celebrated force of imagination. Others, of shared chronology, assume their respective place, whether Fennimore

Cooper in the Leatherstocking saga as frontier external space or Poe in “Usher” and like storytelling as custodian of psyche, splits, ratiocination and internal space. Subsequent canonicity has been frequent. The 1920s bestow a near-magical power on Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. The drama has its prerequisite names in O’Neill, Miller and O’Neill. Poetry’s modernist canon invokes Pound and Eliot, Stevens and Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore and H.D. The South, beyond Faulkner, summons a line to include O’Connor and McCullers, Styron and Capote. A Jewish pantheon invariably gives recognition to Bellow, Malamud and Roth. None of this authorship deserves other than a garland, a working hurrah.

But, no fault of its own, it is a reckoning that also leaves out manifold other tiers and claims. Whether on account of market taste, academia, class, and gender-preferential treatment, there remains virtually the whole of multicultural American literary tradition, which, until comparatively recently, embraces the writing unveiled, for example, in David Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988), or literary-cultural movements like the Harlem and Native American Renaissance both in their antecedents and after-sway, or a vast feminist repertoire spanning Kate Chopin and Gertrude Stein to subsequent moderns and contemporaries. The present account settles upon the four creative arenas already mentioned if not quite as counter-canon then redress, rites-of-passage which have had to contend against the one or other screen and barrier: Native America, Afro-America, Latino/a America and Asian America.

Vanishing Americans: however once-customary usage, especially at the turn of the twentieth century, the term bears little credence for the Native America to be met with today. Demographic tallies may vary but most speak of a population upward of four million with another million-plus in Canada. Inter-marriage and offspring complicate the extended picture. Whether ‘Indian’, with its footfall of Columbian misplaced geography, or the irony of the tribes being given American citizenship in 1924, or the ‘Red Power’ rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1960s and the events at Wounded Knee and the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1973, or the phenomenon of Native Americans living in the cities as much as on the ‘rez’, there can be little doubt of an enduring Native presence in the makeup of the nation. That does not underplay past dips in population, poverty rates, alcohol and drug problems, or the different kind of displacements—to include much museumization of Native life and art. But it underlines survivance, be it the politics of tribal land and community sovereignty, the casino economies, ‘Indians’ with PhDs, or Native film and theatre. It also, crucially, reminds of Native access to a modernity not normally granted.

The sightlines en route to this modernity, and the literature to which it has given rise, are notable. The Mohegan William Apess, writing in *A Son of the Forest* (1829), avers “I could not find the word ‘Indian’ in the Bible and therefore concluded it was a word intended for the purpose of degrading us.” Luther Standing Bear, in *My People, The Sioux* (1928), wrote in consternation that “It is my desire that all people know the truth about the first Americans.” Vine Deloria, Sioux lawyer, had good reason to observe in his *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1970) that “To be an Indian in modern society is in a very real sense to be unreal and a-historical.” Gerald Vizenor, Anishinaabe (or Ojibway/Chippewa) leading novelist, offers the following synoptic perspective in his *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports* (1990):

The use of the word ‘Indian’ is postmodern, a navigational conception, a colonial invention, a simulation, in sound and transcription. Tribal culture became nominal, diversities were twisted to the core, and oral stories were set in written languages.... More than a hundred million people, and hundreds of distinct

tribal cultures were simulated as Indians; an invented pantribal name, one sound, bears treaties, statutes, and seasons, but no tribal culture, language, religion, or landscape. (1990, xxiii–xxiv)

In his poem “A Discussion About Indian Affairs” (*Deer Hunting and Other Poems*, 1990) Geary Hobson (Cherokee-Quapaw-Chicasaw) ponders the ongoing gaps, the caesuras:

She was a white woman
from some little town
in one of the Dakotas
“I’ve heard about Cherokees
—everybody’s heard about Cherokees—
but I always thought the Chickasaws
were some made up tribe—
one that never existed—
invented by someone like Al Capp,
word like “Kickapoo,” you know?”
“There’s a Kickapoo tribe, too.”
I said. “Oh,” she said,
and having nothing more to say
on the subject, said nothing.
I wondered if we’d ever have
anything to say to one another.

Shorthand must do to convey some of the barriers through which a Native American literary tradition, one that is written and scriptural as against the massive resources of oral legacy, has had to confront. Noble savagery vies with the devil mythus (Cotton Mather, that doughtiest of Puritans, would write in *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693)—“The New Englanders are a people of God settled in those which were once the devil’s territories”). How to escape the diorama of simulations? The Boston Tea Party of 1773 with New Englanders in Mohawk garb. The ‘Indian Warrior’ spectacle of the Cody circuses begun in 1883. The gallery of barbershop manikins. Red Man chewing tobacco. The Indian head nickel (actually a woman). Film from D.W. Griffith’s *The Red Man and Child* (1908) to *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the latter replete with white-woman rescue and Vanishing American ending. And always the Tonto of *The Lone Ranger* first as radio broadcast begun in 1933 and then ABC’s 1949–58 TV series. What cost, too, each sports naming, the Atlanta Braves with their Tomahawk Chop, the Kansas City Chiefs, and more egregiously still, the Washington Redskins? To which ‘canonical’ American literature adds its figures and stereotypes, from Twain’s Injun Joe in *Tom Sawyer* (1876) to Hemingway’s Indians to Ken Kesey’s Chief Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962)?

But few could doubt that a major shift occurred when N. Scott Momaday was awarded a Pulitzer in 1969 for *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the first Native text ever to be so honoured. Its portrait of World War II in the Pacific and Jemez pueblo Indian Country as respective combat-zones, and their personification in the figure of the Native-born Abel, yielded a massive, lyric, imaginative interplay of both history and fable. This circling, reflexive narrative, with its comparisons of calendar, belief system, memory, law, site, and languages, deploys a depth of image, a voicing, rare by any standards. What to suppose its place, then as now, in the canon of American literature?

That *House Made of Dawn* has assumed classic Native American status is irrefutable; it also has been taken to have ushered in the Native American Renaissance, however contentious the naming. Would an overall literary canon be advantaged or disadvantaged by inclusion of any or all of the following novels: James Welch's Blackfeet tour de force *Fools Crow* (1986) with its Native perspective on 'Indian wars' in Montana and the West, Gerald Vizenor's postmodern *Bearheart* (1978) as Pilgrim's Progress through a dystopian America as much out of petroleum as moral balance, or Leslie Marmon Silko's hemispheric chronicle of Americas both indigenous and Euro-American in *Almanac of the Dead* (1991)? The circuit readily extends to the fiction of Louise Erdrich, Thomas King, Sherman Alexie; the theatre of Hanay Geiogamah; and the poetry of Lucy Tapahonso, Simon Ortiz, Ray A. Youngbear, Jim Barnes and Diane Glancy. In Betty Louise Bell's *Faces in the Moon* (1994), about the put-upon lives of the two Oklahoma-Cherokee Evers sisters, Lucy Evers seeks out her family-tribal history at the Oklahoma Historical Society only to be met with a supercilious white male assistant. Her riposte speaks hugely—"I am your worst nightmare. I am an Indian with a pen." Canons might be said to rise and fall by implication.

Afro-America yields its own indispensable history and resources of literary voice over a span from the sale of "Twenty Negars" brought from West Africa via the Caribbean to Virginia in 1619 to the inauguration of President Barack Obama in January 2009. The stunning eventfulness of that history could hardly not invite en-wording. The benchmarks compel, from slaveholding and abolition to the Great Migration into Harlem and the northern cities, and from Dixie segregation to King's "I Have a Dream" and Malcolm X. Who could doubt the utter importance of Jazz, Blues, Soul, and Rock and Roll, together with all the different contours of black popular style in dress, foodways, sport, performance, and speech? More to the immediate point, who does not now look to African American authorship for a gallery as full as it is diverse in written voice? It would be almost perversely negligent to imagine a 'canonical' America that took little or no account of this cultural as much as political history.

The urge to voice has its own necessary lineage, no doubt born of slavery-time and won against the coercive voicelessness both of southern colour-line and northern metropolis. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845), its subtitle of *Written by Himself* itself a call to attention, speaks trenchantly of illiteracy as its own servitude and of command of the written word as "the pathway from slavery to freedom". Richard Wright, in whose *Native Son* (1945) twentieth-century Afro-fiction looks to one of its great neo-realist landmarks, offers a connecting thread in the Chicago section of his autobiography *American Hunger* (post. 1977), the follow-up to *Black Boy* (1945):

Each Saturday morning I assisted a young Jewish doctor in slitting the vocal cords of a fresh batch of dogs from the city pound. The object was to devocalize the dogs so that their howls would not disturb the patients in other parts of the hospital.... [T]hey would lift their heads to the ceiling and gape in a soundless wail. The sight became lodged in my imagination as a symbol of silent suffering. (1977, 48)

Freedom, voice, imagination: the terms give rubric to the vast literary articulation of black America. Denial of canonical access, however longstanding, could not last.

As in Native tradition, oral resource comes richly into play—folk legends, call and response, the dozens, and comedy stand-up to modern rap. Slave narrative, well more than a thousand recovered texts, offers a point of departure. But the tradition necessarily embraces the

New Negro or Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, with luminaries to include Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston, a subsequent line of poetry from Gwendolyn Brooks to Rita Dove, Wright himself and his fellow mid-century writers, and an activist discursive tradition from W.E.B. DuBois to Cornel West. The modern African American pantheon raises every further question as to canonical inclusion and exclusion.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) sets one standard, the South-to-Harlem peregrination of its unnamed narrator full of canny reflexive manoeuvre as to black word on the white page. The essays of James Baldwin, inaugurated with *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), bespeak rarest articulacy, typically "Stranger in the Village" ("This world is white no longer, and it never will be again"). Almost single-handedly LeRoi Jones/Imamu Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), set in the circling Manhattan subway as "the flying underbelly of the nation", gave black theatre a version of slavery's Underground Railway updated, a symbolist, iconic portrait of 'race' in the US. In *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker created her 'womanist' classic, the epistolary novel of black female autonomy enacted as both Africa and African American story. The Nobel laureateship conferred upon Toni Morrison left no doubt that in a novel like *Beloved* (1987), with its "haint" of slavery and en-ghosting of past-into-present, she had written one of America's wholly consequential fictions.

No one summary does justice overall, but Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" carries Afro-America as both spoken and written word, a vintage blues, into any due notion of literary canon:

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusk rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(First published in *Oasis Magazine*, 1921.)

How not to bring into the reckoning Latino/a North America? Whether or not, since estimates vary, it indeed ranks among the largest Spanish-speaking countries in the world, its cultural heft is not to be denied. The complex histories of colonialism, settlement, region, and language have meant that at 13% or so Hispanics constitute the US's largest 'minority'. Which raises the

always-pertinent question of whether a minority writes minority literature. Certainly Latino/a authorship, and to select only from Chicano/a, Puertorriqueño/a, Cuban American and Dominican American, affords ample witness.

Step towards the Chicano/a southwest—Texas (Tejas), California, Arizona, New Mexico (Nuevo Mejico) and Nevada—and the heritage is plait and mix: idioms and code-switches within the interaction of Spanish, English and Nahuatl, mythologies of La Raza and Aztlán, and always the issue of the border and the politics of documented and undocumented. If any one work has done signal literary duty it lies in *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Rudolfo Anaya's portrait of the artist as young man and as Joycean and lyric as that designation suggests. The rite of passage it inscribes, involving *curanderismo*, Christian dove, Aztec eagle and deific owl, poignantly calls up a one highly particular life brought to maturity amid the bandwidths of community memory.

The Puertorriqueño dispensation steers between two worlds, Caribbean island and citted New York and New Jersey. Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Latin Deli and Other Stories* (1993) offers a finely turned case in point, island family memory as against "El Building" with its tenement dynasties. Cuban America has known few more exhilarating narratives than Oscar Hijuelos's *Mambo King Play Songs of Love* (1989), its portrait of the Cuban musician brothers César and Néstor Castillo who bring mambo and 'Latin' sexuality to New York as a kind of pre-Fidel period memory. Julia Alvarez's *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) uses its family of sisters to refract in each different story the generational interactions of La República Dominicana and the US, a cautionary tale of Americanization and its gains and losses. These, and the huge roster of accompanying Latino/a texts, serve yet another kind of notice of the folly (not to say inattention) of being excised from any due literary reckoning.

The implications are shrewdly foreshadowed in Carlos Cumpián's poem "Cuento", to be found in *Coyote Sun* (1990):

Today I thought I'd call home
So I got on the
Telephone
and said: "Operator please give me
AZTLAN person to person"
She replied: "Sorry sir, still checking"
After two minutes –
She asked me to spell it –
So I did –
A-Z-T-L-A-N
She thought I said ICELAND
At first but after the first spelling, she said
What?!!
AZTLAN!
She said is this some
Kind of joke
I said, "No, you
know where it is"
She said – "Sir I cannot
Take this call

But if you wish I'll
Let you talk to
My supervisor – ”
I said: “Fine
Put 'em on
I got time” –
Well her supervisor got on the line –
And I told her what
I had said before
All she could say was that
was the first time she ever heard
about it – I said, “You'll hear more
about it soon!” – and hung up – (1990, 45)

Asian America. The composite term hides a multitude of historical lives and migrancies but not the salient fact that by 2050, predictions indicate, the Asian American population will emerge as the largest ‘minority’ in the US. Nor does it obscure the prospect that mid-century will see an end to any one presiding ethnic group. Once again a run of shorthand terms do duty for historical complexity: Yellow Peril, Orientalism, the 1882 Exclusion Act, Angel Island detention of Chinese, the Asia-phobic 1924 Immigration Act, Executive Order 9066, which in the wake of Pearl Harbor put 120,000 Japanese Americans into internment, together with the long corridors of stereotype, Charlie Chan to Tokyo Rose, pigtail laundryman to High Tech geek, Filipino maid to Korean groceryman. In his *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (2002), Frank H. Wu confronts not only model minority notions of Asian America but “honorary whiteness”:

People speak of “American” as if it means “white” and “minority” as if it means “black.” In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority. (2002, 20)

Literature in all its forms has given answering voice. Chinese America found itself one benchmark in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1977), California 1960s as both Chinatown and campus radicalism mediated through a fiction-of-fact “Maxine”. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1985), using the trope of *mah jong*, explores the lives, and languages, of four mother–daughter pairs to enter the time-space of the China behind Chinese America. Frank Chin's *Bulletproof Buddhists* (1998) takes New Journalist aim at what he perceives as damagingly false American images of China, kow-towing weaklings, sealed and passive sojourners. This roster has infinitely expanded: yet more American literary candidature.

Japanese America yields a span from the storytelling of Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California* (1949), with its exquisite vignettes of community life, and Hisaye Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables* (1989), with its camp and farm-life parables, to a Big Tent novel like Karen Tei Yamashita's *I-Hotel* (2010), with its San Francisco canvas given over to the rise of 1960s Asian identity and activism. Korean America can invoke Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), a challengingly subtle evocation set in Queens, New York, and under the guise of borough politics, of the very languages of ethnicity. In Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* (1990),

set in the Marcos years and with Imelda Marcos as Madame Galactica, the Philippines and its American diaspora are seen as playfield, fantasticality. Little wonder Hagedorn would entitle her 1993 anthology *Charlie Chan is Dead*. A greatly useful purchase on all these different imaginative skeins is to be found in the Indian-American memoir of Meena Alexander in her *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996):

I learn from Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Chinese Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, Arab Americans ... and my art-work reflects these lines of sense, these multiple anchorages. (1996, 128)

The ‘anchorages’ on offer, precisely, give the challenge to the one prevailing literary canon.

Negotiating so diverse a circuit risks giving into lists and too hasty a survey. But something of the kind becomes almost inevitable in the span of a single essay (as indicated in the references I have elsewhere tried to write at length on the issues and rosters involved). Three touchstones can serve as a means of aligning the arguments in play: an overlap of canonical name, early twentieth-century white-liberal radical, and contemporary African American multiculturalist.

Herman Melville’s *Redburn* (1849) sets out America as bracing human cartography:

You cannot spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world.... We are not a narrow tribe of men.... No, our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents pouring into one.... Our ancestry is lost in the universal paternity, and Caesar and Alfred, Paul and Luther, Homer and Shakespeare are as much ours as Washington, who is as much the world’s as our own. (1849, 169).

Randolph Bourne’s “Transnational America” (*Atlantic Monthly* 1916) farsightedly pitches against a metronomic America:

America is a unique sociological fabric, and it bespeaks poverty of imagination not to be thrilled at the incalculable potentialities of so novel a union of men. To seek no other goal than the weary old nationalism, belligerent, exclusive, inbreeding, ... is to make patriotism a hollow sham.... It is for the Younger American to accept this cosmopolitanism and carry it along with self-conscious and fruitful purpose. (1916)

Ishmael Reed’s “Introduction” to *The Before Columbus Foundation Fiction and Anthology* (1992) and *The Before Columbus Foundation Poetry Anthology* (1992) neatly gives contemporary tease to one-note canonicity with its allusion to the multicultural as a form of Darwinian survival:

I began to realize that being black or Chicano or Native American, you are forced to see and be aware of disparate cultures. We had to become multicultural, and I think this will be a major factor in determining who finally survives in this country. It’s like evolution—if you have a limited viewpoint you are at a disadvantage. Those who have incorporated other perspectives and allowed their vision to embrace other ways of looking at the world have a better chance of surviving. (1992, 26–7)

All three writers bear the evidence of an America, and American authorship, as a nation of not one canon but multi-canons, a nation of not one but many multiculturalisms. And all the truly richer and better for it.

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