

Representing America: Some Aspects of the Literary Canon Debate

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For the literary scholar, inquiry into the remythologizing of "America" may well be formulated as a question about representation, a question not only about *what* but also *whose* representations and *who* is affirmed as representative. In considering how America is being represented in current literature and literary criticism, especially in the canon debate, I will be concerned in this essay not so much with images of new American realities but with the production of images – with discourses of representation. Following John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*,¹ I will take a critical view of what he calls the "liberal pluralist" demands for the representation of various groups in the literary canon, something which he argues creates a political imaginary, a politics of the image which risks being an isolated phenomenon within the academy. For Guillory, the function of such a displaced politics is to reconstitute a *fragmented* American society in ideological terms: "The critique of the canon responds to the disunity of the culture as a whole, as a fragmented whole, by constituting new cultural unities at the level of gender, race, or more recently ethnic subcultures, or gay and lesbian subcultures."² This view that new unities mask a fundamental disunity suggests that Sacvan Bercovitch's analysis of American consensus ideology is still operative,

¹ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1993.

² Guillory, 34.

in spite of the culture wars.³ In fact, Guillory describes the canon debate as characteristically American, where the principle of "social identity" is uncritically invoked, and where both sides of the conflict rely on a questionable notion of Western culture as monolithic.

On the basis of Guillory's critique, I will first consider certain textual strategies by means of which texts that challenge the old cultural hegemony may make themselves amenable to a politics of the imaginary. I will focus on two texts which are noteworthy for the way in which they challenge the traditional idea of America and the American canon, but which also reappropriate traditions in problematic ways: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*⁴ and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*.⁵ Second, I will consider another important dimension of the canon debate, namely the revaluing of the traditional canon from new perspectives. Also in this instance will I argue that a form of reappropriation of tradition for non-traditional ends contributes to a politics of the imaginary. My examples in this instance will be taken from a recent book in honor of the late Joseph Riddel entitled *America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon*.⁶

In his *The Opening of the American Mind*, Lawrence Levine counters the reaction against multiculturalism well when he asserts that "every previous generation of Americans has spied in the new immigration of its own time the seeds of dissolution and chaos."⁷ Yet this sobering observation should not prevent us from asking what is distinctive about ethnic conflict in our time. An answer to this question has to account, I believe, not only for new types of immigration, but for the new pressure that current global processes, both economic and cultural, place on traditional cultural forms. This is a pressure felt in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and Trinh's *Woman, Native, Other*, which have a number of things in com-

3 See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

4 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). All subsequent references are to this edition. 5 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). All subsequent references in the text are to this edition. 6 Kathryn V. Lindberg and Joseph G. Kornick, eds., *American Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

7 Lawrence Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 131.

mon: they represent the assertion of new ethnic groups in the US; they develop culturally specific forms of feminism in a postcolonial context; they take a critical view of logocentric Western or First World culture, associating the non-logocentric with Third World culture, and reaffirming myth and storytelling; they are cross-genre works, mixing the first person essay, at times autobiographical, with social criticism and theory. In terms of their publication in the US and their inclusion on American college syllabi, they contribute not only to the definition of a multicultural America but also to a transnational culture that emerges in American border crossings.

In my view, these are texts which dramatically testify to the continuing importance and difficulty of the canon debate. They speak powerfully against ethnic marginalization, while relying on oversimplified distinctions between Western and non-Western culture and assuming a contradictory position with respect to this distinction: a position in-between or on the border but at the same time one that has its strongest allegiance with the non-Western side and with and pre-modern traditions. It is a contradiction, I believe, that is ultimately not a matter of personal failure but rather a symptom of an objective dilemma: the difficulty of practicing a cultural politics without displacing politics at the levels of institutionalization or material production.

Anzaldua's *The Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* asserts the plural identity of the person situated on the border, or, indeed on many borders, as the author is of both Spanish and Indian descent, a lesbian Chicana who speaks English and a variety of Spanish/Mexican dialects. In asserting the border identity, Anzaldua draws on history, feminism, archetypal psychology, Indian mythology, and Mexican Catholicism, using both expository prose and poetry, and writing alternately in English and Spanish. Her writing performs the challenge to borders which is its argument, as she engages in a code switching that is discursive as well as linguistic, mixing analytical and mythological thinking. "*La mestiza*," writes Anzaldua,

constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality ... (79)

Yet such claims for the ideal of plural identity become self-contradictory, because they depend not only on a stereotypical "Western mode" but also on a privileging of ancient myth accessed through Jungian archetypal psychology. As Anzaldua narrates the vision she once had of a giant cobra in her bedroom, she is able to associate her mental experience at once with the "instinctual in its collective impersonal," with the "feminine ... the source of all energy and life," and with "Cihuacoatl, Serpent Woman" (35). The mestiza, who is forced to live at the interface between the two brain functions which the West has split off from each other, must become "adept at switching modes," Anzaldua claims, and not fear the "inner reality," the "spirit world that Jung calls "the Shadow" (37).

While Anzaldua's book must be taken seriously as a challenge to Anglo-American hegemony, so must the terms of that challenge. How are the original contexts of Anzaldua's plural identifications modified by their historical relativization? In what sense can the identification with a primordial, instinctually intact culture be compatible with the modern concept of a plural personality? And in what sense does the Jungian association of cultural and psychological archetypes, as a construction of Western culture, already compromise the distinction between Western- and non-Western modes? The lack of satisfactory answers to such questions undermines *The Borderlands'* new mestiza ideal both as cultural identity and as political strategy.

Like Gloria Anzaldua, Trinh T. Minh-ha extends the concept of America, or shows, rather, that the concept lacks unity. Anzaldua problematizes the US-Mexican border by reference to the history of conquest and to the current exploitation of migrant laborers; Trinh's perspective in *Woman, Native, Other* is broader and more complex, as it involves the relation of Western and non-Western cultures in a global postcolonial context. In terms of its contribution to postcolonial theory, Trinh's book also has a complexity that results from its self-reflexiveness, its reflection on writing and storytelling as cultural practices. Trinh's mixing of first-person narration with anthropology, literary theory, and feminist theory is remarkable for the way in which it gives a voice or embodiment to what

one often encounters as abstract discourse. Her book evidently performs its ideal of "writing the body," an "act of language" that is both literary and social and which, as Trinh puts it, is "a way of making theory in gender" (44). This concept of a writing which actualizes a unity of form and content is, it seems to me, the most central concept of the book, governing its critique of Western anthropology and underlying the ideal of story-telling with which the book opens and closes.

Trinh refers in relatively positive terms to the recent anthropological work of James Clifford and Clifford Geertz. It is the work of Levi-Strauss, not named in the text but referred to as "The Great Master," which is made to typify the ethnocentrism of Western anthropology and its arrogant relation to the Third World. Trinh criticizes the dualistic reasoning of the structural method, which permits The Great Master to displace native self-descriptions with non-conscious, deep-structural principles. For Trinh this method is best described as "gossip" – conversation *about* rather than *with* another. Though this critique has its justification, one may well wonder why Trinh should concentrate her attack on Western anthropology on work that was done in the fifties. In my view, this strategy betrays the wish for a simpler and more nearly polarized opposition of friend and foe conducive to identity politics. In my reading of *Woman, Native, Other*, it is only storytelling as a Third World discourse that can be legitimized as a discourse *about* the Other, because it is also a discourse *of* the Other, an Other positioned simultaneously within the Third and the First World.

Trinh refers to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Alice Walker, and other women of color, and especially, she frequently quotes from Maxine Hong Kingston, the Chinese American writer, and Leslie Marmon Silko, the Laguna Pueblo Indian writer, both of whom have reflected intensely on traditional storytelling. What unites these writers, in Trinh's analysis, is that their works do not conform to the Western criteria of a good story: they "either have no development, no climax that forms the story's point, or no end that leaves the mind at rest"(142). Their open structure responds to the way that storytelling is situated within a communal process of self-creation in which women play the key role: "Storytelling, the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community, constitutes a rich oral legacy, whose values have regained all importance recently, especially in the context of writings by women of color." Trinh

points out the significance, in the struggle against the colonizer's language, of the storyteller's "contact with her foremothers" in the "chain of guardianship and of transmission" that she quite simply calls "creation" (148-149). It is within this storytelling chain, this "story that began long ago," that Trinh inserts her own discourse.

Yet this vision of female solidarity and communal autonomy is intricately linked with – might arguably be said to be predicated on – one of the central lines of thinking about narrative in the West during the last few decades, a line of thinking which has already come to espouse the language of boundary crossings: lack of closure, multiple discourses, overlapping of linguistic and other practices, multiple identities. Even as Trinh places non-Western culture beyond the grasp of the all-grasping West, she reappropriates traditional culture from the standpoint of post-modern and postcolonial theory. Like Anzaldúa, she combines an affirmation of difference – cultural plurality and hybridity – with an affirmation of identity – the idealized privileging of the female and the non-Western – which seems dependent on the categories of oppression it aims to negate.

It is obviously not only in terms of representing women and ethnic groups, however, that literary canon reformation runs the risk of practicing a politics of the imaginary; this risk is just as much present in attempts to critique or revalue the traditional canon. The postmodern appropriation of American literary history was evident already twenty years ago in the work of Joseph Riddel, in whose honor the anthology *America's Modernisms* has recently been published. "'America' performs its origin," Riddel believed, "'as a reflection on its unique difference; yet, even this very difference is a projection of what American thought and literature would be if they could but realize themselves.'"⁸ As Joseph Kronick observes on Riddel's project in the Afterword to *America's Modernisms*, "America has sought to reinvent itself in a literature whose primary subject matter has been its own invention ... American writing allegorizes itself as self-engendering quotation, as the repetition of what is to come."⁹ Thus Riddel, in "translating and transposing deconstruction

8 In Joseph G. Kronick, "Afterword Joseph N. Riddel (1931-1991)," in *America's Modernisms*, 208

9 Kronick, 208

and the name of Derrida into America, discovers in Poe and Williams deconstruction 'ventriloquized in an American idiom.'¹⁰

In "Henry James, William James, and the Metaphysics of American Thinking," Mark Bauerlein remains close to Riddel's translative project. Bauerlein reads Henry James as portraying a process of internationalization which is the opposite of the American Dream, the Adamic myth of Emerson and Whitman, because, instead of turning away from the European past, it regards America, having no cultural identity in itself, as the "act of confronting and overcoming Europe."¹¹ Bauerlein observes, however, that James's characters fail in this process because they transcend one local culture only to become immersed in another. James's American characters "fail to discover a workable method, one that would immerse them in other cultures yet preserve them as transcultural."¹² Bauerlein further observes that Henry's elder brother William levelled this same criticism at Henry himself, or at least his literary method, which, in spite of the "international theme," he found to be vitiated by Henry's adoption of the excessive sensibility of the London upper class. In Bauerlein's reading, William James's pragmatist philosophizing succeeds in developing that method the lack of which causes Henry James's fiction to founder:

Henry's program for "American global achievement" requires a radical innovation in consciousness, a fundamental adjustment that his characters often fail to achieve but which William's elucidations of this new thinking prophesy. He avoids the former's epistemological mistakes by reinterpreting and resituating otherness, by broaching otherness as a necessary, appropriate, yet un-objectifiable condition of momentous thinking. Deserving the predicate "American" precisely because it eschews any such limiting, ideologically sedimented terms as "American," this thinking thrives by being drawn to whatever reduces its thoughts to relativity.¹³

Does Bauerlein affirm this as the genuine American method, or does he restrict himself to the claim that this is specifically William James's American method? Evidently he tends toward the larger claim in the

10 Ibid., 209.

11 Mark Bauerlein, "Henry James, William James, and the Metaphysics of American Thinking," in *America's Modernisms*, -55.

12 Ibid., 56.

13 Ibid., 75-76.

metonymic association of the American name and the name of America: the un-ending progress of the pragmatist method, he says, is the "only attitude or orientation in which the (Jamesian) American mind finds its fulfillment."¹⁴

This tendency to consider the Other in abstract and metaphysical terms as idea, rather than as a real other with a specific social and historical character, is even more pronounced in Michael Beehler's essay on T. S. Eliot in the same volume, and Beehler's approach also resembles Bauerlein's in focusing on the contrast between closed and open-ended process. While Bauerlein remains close to Riddel's project, however, Beehler takes issue with Riddel's view of T. S. Eliot as conservatively seeking closure and transcendent knowledge in a manner that puts him outside the characteristic American literary and cultural project. Eliot is, for Beehler, a writer who radically opens himself to otherness. To take Eliot as the "repressive other to the projective, postmodern character of American poetry and poetics," Beehler argues, is to mistake the poet for Prufrock, who has "known them all already, known them all."¹⁵ My aim in the present context is not to adjudicate this dispute, but to challenge the terms of the debate and the retroactive reading of modern American literature as postmodern. It is a remarkable experience, I find, to encounter a discussion of Eliot's ethics in which his anti-democratic sentiments, his anti-semitism, and his gender bias are not inquired into.

Does William James develop the American method of cultural expansion through the opening to unassimilatable otherness, which Henry James fiction requires but does not achieve? Does Eliot, like Henry James, fail to exemplify the Americanness of radical alterity and performative self-quotation, or does he succumb to the totalization of the self-reflexive ideal? To pose questions about American literature in these terms is to reappropriate the canon in terms that are ostensibly open to cultural difference, yet the discussion can proceed at a level of abstraction which omits any references to real others with a specific social and historical character. Thus, what is assimilated here, in this project aimed at non-assimilation, is history itself, as postmodernism is conceived, not as a specific historical event, but as a process that can be indefinitely

¹⁴ Ibid., 76.

extended into the past. By the same process, the other becomes, not the reality beyond specific social representations, but the general quality of otherness.

One does not have to subscribe to the rejection of dead white males in order to get the distinct impression here that the postmodern revaluing of the canon is merely a rewriting of traditional canonical arguments under new forms, merely a saving of the canon as the expression of hegemonic values, even if this rewriting generates new criteria according to which writers like Henry James and T. S. Eliot are subject to criticism. The rhetoric may be more pluralistic, but it remains couched in the monological discourse of philosophy. Still, one may ask: isn't there in Bauerlein's reading of Jamesian pragmatism a valuable contribution to the question of Americanness in the idea of a transcultural American method and the preservation of otherness in the experience of wonder as a fundamental existential outlook? Couldn't this serve as an ideology in a positive sense, unifying a fragmented multicultural society even while preserving cultural difference? While it is tempting to answer such a question positively, another essay in *America's Modernisms* gives some powerful reasons to choose the negative answer.

Paul Bové's "Anarchy and Perfection: Henry Adams, Intelligence, and America" suggests not only that global process must be considered in material terms, but also that global and transcultural process as such may have quite negative effects. Bové's reading of Henry Adams is a serious challenge to the canon and canonical thinking as a materialist critique of totalizing and centralizing power. Bové advocates Henry Adams as a model for the critical intellectual:

Unlike the major canonical figures, he is concerned to understand the United States materialistically, that is, in terms of its forces of production; and unlike many others whom academics value for the "subject positions" that "situate" them "outside" the canon, he has a rigorously global perspective on the United States that specifically cannot be assimilated to either the statist project of American Studies or its recent reformist incarnations.¹⁶

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15 Michael Beehler, "'Riddle the Inevitable': Levinas, Eliot, and the Critical Moment of Ethics," in *America's Modernisms*, 119.

16 Paul Bové, "Anarchy and Perfection: Henry Adams, Intelligence, and America," in *America's Modernisms*, 39.

From Bové's standpoint, the representing of America by way of a literary canon, or by challenges to the canon made in terms of the representation of new social identities, remains caught within a nationalist project, ignorant of America's role in the globalization of capital. For Bové, Adams' is a valuable counter-model because his study of the United States reaches the conclusion that America,

has no self-identity, it has no national continuity, it has no unified history, and it has no intelligence to guide it to the New Jerusalem it will attempt to impose on its own continent and the world. What it has is blind force and recurrent crises. The knowledge that Adams produces in this analysis cannot reinforce the nation or capital because it cannot circulate within capital or within America.¹⁷

The assertion that America has no self-identity recalls the Jamesian conviction, but while the Jameses seek to define America as transcultural process, Adams' anarchist critique of the perfected system, in Bové's analysis, can aid the critical intellectual in resisting Americanism as "globalization" and the ambition of those groups or nations who seek "to be expert leaders to the world."¹⁸

The possibility that two such different conclusions can be drawn from the common perception that America lacks identity may suggest that the current struggle to remythologize or re-represent America in the so-called culture wars is a displacement from the actual ground of conflict. If fundamental problems arise at the level of conflicting material interests, then attempts to solve them at the level of representation are likely to rebound on themselves and become contradictory. The assertion that America lacks identity, as the obverse of the Adamic myth, needs to be specified as the absence of identity in the European sense for Americans of European descent. We have seen, in the works of Anzaldúa and Minha, how American immigrants from outside of Europe are more likely to see America in terms of a Western world hostile to non-Western culture. Yet globalization of the kind that already Henry Adams' could begin to analyze now appears to undermine even this opposition.

The conclusion I incline toward on the basis of the few, but perhaps

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

representative, examples which I have briefly considered here, is that the role of what Paul Bové calls the critical intellectual with regard to representing America can never be a positive role of advocacy, but must center on a critique of the politics of representation, the politics and production of the image. Thus we must inquire into the historical circumstances surrounding the production of cultural texts. I agree with John Guillory when he says it is more strategic to argue that "the school has the social obligation of providing access to ... [non-canonical] works, *because they are important and significant cultural works*" (52). To deal with this question of cultural value we must attend both to the specificity of cultural texts as such and to their social and political valorization as cultural capital. To separate politics from the politics of the imaginary, we need to separate the cultural and the political even as we analyze their inevitable intersection. If the humanist ideal of autonomous and universal cultural values is replaced by the equally vacuous claim that everything is political, nothing has been gained.

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