

# U.S. SOCIETY & VALUES

VOLUME 5

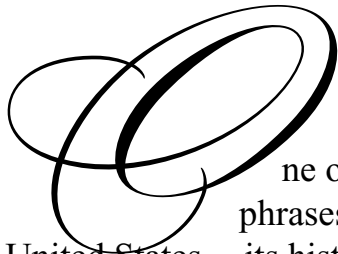
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# FROM THE EDITORS



One of the timeless phrases with which the United States -- its history, its perspective, its reality -- is identified is "*e pluribus unum*," or, "from many, one". These words describe both how the United States and its literature have evolved over the centuries -- through the coming together of many traditions to form a nation and a literature that are different from the ones that existed a century, a decade, even a year before.

All of U.S. literature is multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial, from pre-colonial days to the present. At one moment in history or another, one grouping may have defined

multiculturalism in that day, such as the European cultures that flowed into the United States 100 years ago, and those of Asia and Latin America in the year 2000.

Today, American literature is rich in newer traditions -- and some that have been transformed. Venues, sensibilities, themes have changed as well. In considering developments within Arab American, Asian American, black American, Hispanic American and Native American writing, this journal introduces a global audience to the continually evolving multicultural literature of our day, and to a selection of gifted creative talents, as the process of renewal continues in U.S. literature in the new century. ■

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# AN INTRODUCTORY COMMENT

BY WILLIAM R. FERRIS  
CHAIRMAN, U.S. NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

**B**efore I knew there was such a thing as American literature, I was immersed in stories. Growing up in Mississippi, I inherited a rich tradition of storytelling from my family, my neighbors and my friends, both black and white -- all of whom, I suspect, had heeded the old African proverb that “when an old man or old woman dies, a library burns to the ground.” It’s hard to resist the magic of a grandfather who always said he was raised on “cornbread and recollections.” I heard stories on the back porch on steamy Southern nights, and on the lawn of the Rose Hill Church, where black families have worshipped since before the Civil War. And I began to gather stories of my own.

Over the years, I’ve developed a particular love for the work of the sons and

daughters of the South — William Faulkner, Alice Walker, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty and Alex Haley. Each, in his or her own unique way, told a story -- a personal history of the United States. Many others have, too -- sons and daughters of many countries and many cultures.

Multicultural literature is a major source of insight into the rich cultural dynamics of our society, a primary medium for Americans to comprehend our nation’s rich cultural heritage, and for international audiences to fathom life and thought in the United States. In the stories they tell from different points of view, U.S. authors of a multitude of backgrounds build bridges of understanding over which all of us can cross into each other’s worlds.

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At the National Endowment for the Humanities, we recognize how vital these writers and storytellers are, across the spectrum of experience. And so we have created a number of programs to promote understanding among cultures.

“Storylines America” is a series of live “talk radio” programs in which listeners can chat with authors about the beliefs -- and the stereotypes -- that have shaped American identity. “Bridges That Unite Us” brings audiences of all ages together at public libraries in the Southwestern United States to discuss Hispanic American immigration and acculturation. Many schoolteachers spend their

summers at seminars on university campuses, studying multicultural U.S. literature, to be able to return to their students reinvigorated by their new knowledge.

Ultimately, the power of multicultural literature affects us all, because literature defines the true essence -- and soul -- of our country. ■

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*William R. Ferris is an author, folklorist, filmmaker and academic administrator. In 1997, President Clinton appointed him chairman of the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities. The NEH is the U.S. Government agency responsible for funding humanities programs on literature, history, philosophy and foreign languages across the United States.*

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**OVERVIEW:  
MULTICULTURAL  
LITERATURE IN THE  
UNITED STATES:**

# ADVENT & PROCESS

BY JOHN LOWE

“Writers of color in America help validate American writing.”

-- *Russell Leong, Chinese American poet and novelist*

At universities across the United States, at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students entering a class in American literature will confront a syllabus that will include books that are stunningly diverse.

Indeed, even in secondary schools, teenagers are ruminating over the writings of men and women with names that appear unpronounceable at first, or at the least, unfamiliar. And yet, as the youths delve into these volumes, they will learn more than their parents did, during high school, about the experiences of representatives of different ethnic, racial and immigrant groups that are today part of

the mosaic that is the United States populace.

Multicultural, and immigrant, literature may be expanding on the college and high school syllabus, but it is not at all a new phenomenon. It goes back to the turn of the 20th century -- when waves of Europeans came to the United States -- and beyond, to 19th-century newcomers, and, even further, for example, to Native American tales in the oral tradition. And since Native Americans are, as their identification clearly states, the only homegrown denizens of the country, one can fairly argue that every other U.S. writer is a descendant of another culture -- indeed, an ethnic. The focus in this article, though, is on literature written by non-English immigrants and their descendants, African Americans and Native Americans.

As part of a course of study, indigenous U.S.

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literature is a fairly recent phenomenon. When Thomas Jefferson was attending the College of William and Mary in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Latin and Greek ruled the classroom. Well into this century, America's colonial linkage with England still was leaving a mark: most works studied were by English writers. At the time of his death in 1891, in fact, Herman Melville was virtually a forgotten figure. Emily Dickinson and other 19<sup>th</sup>-century poets and writers now considered "classic" had to wait to achieve their status until 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars affirmed and acclaimed them.

But if white, Anglo-American writers, born in the United States, had to wait their turn in the first century or so of U.S. history, multicultural writers fared worse. Frederick Douglass, now extolled for his memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, and others had stories to tell that had a limited readership. The same fate befell the works of other exciting black American writers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century — Anna Julia Cooper, Pauline Hopkins and Charles Chesnutt, for example. Other ethnic and racial groups had no profile whatsoever. Gradually, though, there were some enlightened individuals, such as novelist William Dean Howells, editor of the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who took some of these writers under his wing, encouraging Chesnutt, Abraham Cahan (an Eastern European Jewish immigrant) and black poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar to pursue their crafts. Howells also made use of fairly convincing, if dialect-speaking ethnic characters in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *An Imperative Duty*, two of his later novels.

How do we define multicultural, or multiethnic writing? Early on, ethnicity was explained in terms of color -- "red," "black" and "white." As the 19<sup>th</sup> century ensued, and the national debate over slavery heightened, citizens narrowed the focus to "black" and "white."

Although black Americans have become visible in all forms of cultural expression in the United States, during the first half of the nation's history, primarily, they were featured in writing emanating from the Southern U.S., and invariably in stereotypical roles. Only with the rise of groups like the elegant French-speaking men of color, *Les Cénelles*, whose poetry discussed the complexities of a mixed heritage, did a

truly distinctive ethnic voice emerge. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the writer George Washington Cable began to make a case against the continuing oppression of people of color. His novel, *The Grandissimes*, was a heroic story of slavery against the backdrop of the rich creole world of the state of Louisiana.

Gradually, other multicultural writing surfaced. A Cherokee Indian named John Rollin Ridge, or Yellow Bird, wrote a stirring novel in 1854, not about Cherokees, but about a legendary Mexican bandit who had committed robberies in California in the manner of a Robin Hood. In time, mostly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rich Native American and African American oral traditions -- including tales, chants, work songs, creation stories, trickster legends and poetry -- were mined, first by Anglo academics and later by scholars from within the multicultural groups themselves.

Principally, though, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, multicultural literature found its readership through newspaper columns and magazines. In Chicago, journalist Finley Peter Dunne created a bartender, Mr. Dooley, a garrulous Irish-American who would hold forth on local, national and international matters for an audience of one, a patron named Mr. Hennessey. In New York City, Jewish immigrants faithfully followed the "Bintel Brief" in Cahan's *Forward*, a Yiddish-language paper. This column, consisting of letters from the newly-arrived seeking advice and succor, and the responses of an unattributed writer, was widely read. And in Oklahoma, Alexander Posey, a Creek Indian, created comic newspaper columns featuring Fus Fixico and his sidekick, Hotgun.

There were some examples of formal literature among ethnic groups during the early decades of the past century. Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska pioneered American Jewish literature with their novels and memoirs. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and other works by writers of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s had a limited impact, but Richard Wright's *Native Son*, focusing on a young black man in Chicago, was an immediate success in 1940, as well as a selection of the popular Book-of-the-Month Club, the first novel by a black writer to be so chosen. Still, ethnic writing, particularly by women, only came to the foreground



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decades later. In the 1940s and 1950s, in African American writing, the “protest” novel held sway, dominated by Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin (although the mystery novels of Chester Himes did find an audience).

In the postwar era, of course, with the advent of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the Chicano political activism and migration from Latin America and Asia from the 1970s on, it was quite natural that the expansion of the U.S. multicultural population would produce a body of writing to be reckoned with, a pattern that continues into the new century. The question was, how would this writing find its way into U.S. literature?

The actual study of multicultural literature has come about gradually during the past three decades. A student in a representative university in the late 1960s might have come upon one or two writers, at most, in his American literature survey course. This was linked, as always, to the publishing industry, to what publishers in the United States were issuing, less than to racism and elitism. The first challenge within the academic community was to successfully argue the case for ethnic literature in the curriculum. The second was to convince publishers of the merits of this body of work. Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple* and many other books, has recalled reading a photocopy version of Hurston’s landmark novel in graduate school, and wondering why she had never heard of it, and moreover, why it wasn’t available anywhere in print.

To make an impact, multicultural writing had to succeed in two arenas. The first was in university classrooms. Universities are where teachers are trained, and where future scholars delve into their subjects and make career choices based upon that research. In that sense, institutions of higher learning have a direct linkage with the reading patterns people establish as adults. The second arena consisted of the national organizations, such as the Modern Language Association, who sponsor the annual conferences with thousands of participants, and a wealth of scholarly presentations, that can be so influential to budding academics and venerable authorities as well.

As recently as the early 1970s, the MLA still was adhering to the American canon, dappled with the likes of Hawthorne, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and

Hemingway, and a few contemporary male Jewish writers such as Philip Roth and Saul Bellow. At one annual meeting, a group of young scholars pressed unsuccessfully the case for a panel session on multicultural literature; rejected, they reconvened in a hotel hallway for an impromptu discussion on African American writing. Out of that spur-of-the-moment conversation came the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, or MELUS. With chapters in several countries and plans for expansion to others, MELUS presents two sessions each year at the MLA conference, sponsors its own annually, and publishes a journal that has introduced many new writers from diverse backgrounds to scholars.

Of course, the MLA has a totally different cast today. At the group’s most recent meeting, in December 1999, the schedule encompassed sessions on ethnicity, hybridity, transnationalism and many other subjects related to multiculturalism. Then, too, the American Studies Association, an important professional group for teachers of U.S. literature and U.S. history, has also created conferences around themes such as multiculturalism dynamics and the impact of borderlands.

**W**ith these beneficial developments within scholar organizations, and with the wave of new arrivals to the United States, the fact is that multicultural literature as a direction and a discipline arose chiefly out of a series of developments in literary studies from the 1970s on. The work of European criticism regarding “difference” in literature encouraged scholars in the United States, such as Columbia University Professor Edward Said, to explore this subject -- the status of “the other” and the exotic in Western literature. As a result, scholars began to investigate writers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, such as Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston, or Native Americans Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor. Ultimately, a decided impact emerged from Harvard University literature professor Werner Sollors’ positing -- in his 1986 volume, *Beyond Ethnicity* -- a new definition of ethnicity, dependent on boundary, rather than content. His assertion that all U.S. literature was ethnic and his careful readings both of works from the traditional canon and from the growing number of ethnic texts prompted a rethinking

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of the canon itself.

Whatever the field of literature, one of the more vital components for its study is the creation of one or more anthologies — samplings of representative readings that, when taken together, can form the basis for a course of study. In 1982, literature professor Paul Lauter gathered more than 40 scholars -- including a number of specialists in ethnic literature -- for a summer institute at Yale University. The conversations were designed to display, critique and assemble the paradigmatic examples of U.S. ethnic literature for an anthology to revolutionize the study of American literature. Since its publication in 1990 by a U.S. academic publishing house, and its reissuance by W.W. Norton and Company, a major New York City-based publisher of general fiction and nonfiction, the resulting *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, a two-volume set, has proven an invaluable catalyst for this field of study. In its wake have come scores of collections treating U.S. literature as a whole -- with multicultural writers well represented -- as well as volumes covering individual disciplines. The numbers of anthologies of Asian American literature, Native American literature and others increase year by year.

**W**ho are these multicultural writers? They are numerous, and wondrously diverse. Today's students on U.S. college campuses, and indeed, students of American studies and literature around the globe, have the opportunity to be exposed to the writings of U.S. novelists, playwrights, poets and memoirists whose roots are in the Caribbean and Mexico, India and Korea, Pakistan and Vietnam, Lebanon and the Philippines, as well as in black America and the Native American nations.

It's interesting to note a possible future expansion in a new direction within the field of multicultural U.S. literature. One of the gnawing problems, in the academic community, has been the fact that a significant amount of work appropriately included in this discipline has been written in languages other than English, and then poorly translated. As a result, the Longfellow Institute, recently established at Harvard University, is working to identify, collect and retranslate literature from many cultures and all time periods. Werner Sollors' recent anthology, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity and the Languages of American Literature*, provides a hint as to the work being accomplished at Longfellow.

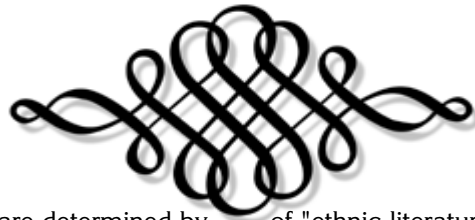
To be sure, these developments expanding the influence of multicultural literature, paralleling its actual creation by the myriad storytellers in the field, are not without some measure of controversy and debate. Each new engagement of teacher and student can be intimidating, until the subject is explored. Still, it is generally acknowledged in the United States today that some of the finest contemporary literature in this country is multicultural in origin, narrative, ideas and perspective, and that the issues of family, identity, the search for self-expression, community that are raised by members of other ethnic and racial groups in fiction and nonfiction speak to all of us. Ultimately, given the changing demographics of the nation as a whole, multicultural literature is unequivocally representative. ■

*John Lowe is professor of English at Louisiana State University, and the author of Jump At the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy and other books.*

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# CHILDREN OF AL-MAHJAR: ARAB AMERICAN LITERATURE SPANS A CENTURY

BY ELMAZ ABINADER



If a literature's life and energy are determined by the activity surrounding it, then Arab American literature is experiencing a renaissance.

In this current atmosphere in the United States of enjoying and celebrating literature of culture and immigration, many feel we have "discovered" the Arab American voice. The emergence of magazines and newspapers that highlight Arab American culture, the abundance of organizations which address issues of Arab American identity and image, the access to web sites and specialized search capabilities in the writings of Arab Americans, the anthologies and presses that collect Arab American voices, the conferences that have as central themes Arab American writers, and the convocations which emphasize the works of Arab American authors and performers all create the impression that Arab American literature is something that has just now emerged, that it has discovered America and America has discovered Arab American writers.

This is not the case. The Arab American literary tradition goes back to the early years of the 20th century, and continues to thrive today.

Literature by Arab Americans is on the syllabi of classes on ethnic literature, literature of immigration and multicultural voices. Scholars from the United States and other countries are compiling bibliographies of Arab American literature and writing dissertations on the literary identity of Arab American writers.

Many believe that this strong presence of Arab American literature is part of or followed the upsurge

of "ethnic literature" in the United States of the 1970s. Writers from Hispanic American, Native American, Asian American and African American worlds emerged, accompanied to a lesser degree by Arab American writers. What went largely unrecognized in the 1970s was that Arab Americans were among the first immigrant writers to organize and to be recognized as a literary force by the broad U.S. literary community.

One of these early contingents, created in the 1920s, was known as Al Rabital al Qalamiyah, or the New York Pen League. This organization, familiarly known as Al-Mahjar, or "immigrant poets," was comprised of writers from Lebanon and Syria who often wrote in Arabic and collaborated with translators of their works. Ameen Rihani, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Mikhail Naimy and Elia Abu Madi served as the major figures in this period, and frequently are credited with developing an interest in immigrant writing in general.

While Gibran is most familiar to U.S. readers, Ameen Rihani is considered by all the "father of Arab American literature." His contributions traveled in both directions. A devotee of the work of Walt Whitman and the free verse style, he sang of himself and his America in many of his works. Most celebrated is his novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), written in verse, which dealt directly with the immigrant experience. Besides being a writer, Rihani was also an ambassador, traveling between his Lebanese homeland and the United States, working for independence from the Ottomans while developing a literary life in the United States. In

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addition, he introduced free verse to the very formulaic and traditional Arab poetic canon as early as 1905, which helped maintain Rihani as an important figure in his homeland.

During Rihani's lifetime, the literary life of the Arab Americans gained in strength. The first Arabic language newspaper, *Kawkab Amerika*, was founded in 1892; by 1919, 70,000 immigrants supported nine Arabic-language newspapers, many of them dailies, including the popular and pivotal *el-Hoda*. But the most important publication of this time in terms of the literary evolution of Arab Americans was a journal, *Syrian World*. Here the most celebrated writers of the early 20th century published plays, poems, stories and articles. The most celebrated of all was Gibran Khalil Gibran, who eventually turned out to be one of the United States' most popular authors.

Although many scholars find Gibran's work deeply philosophical and elementary, in his day he kept company with the greats of U.S. literature -- among them poet Robinson Jeffers, playwright Eugene O'Neill and novelist Sherwood Anderson. Gibran's opus, *The Prophet*, has been a top seller for its publisher for more than a half-century, and in many tabulations, the second most purchased book in the United States after the Bible. Gibran and other members of the Pen League freed Arab American writers of their self consciousness, addressing topics other than the immigrant experience. As a playwright, novelist, artist and poet, he has inspired other writers, musicians, artists and even the U.S. Congress, which established creation of the Khalil Gibran Memorial Poetry Garden in Washington D.C., dedicated by President George Bush in 1990 to commemorate Gibran's influence and universal themes.

But if Gibran and Rihani were celebrated with both popularity and honors, other members of the original Al Rabital group, among them Mikhail Naimy and Elia Abu Madi, did not attain their deserved recognition in the United States, even though Naimy was once nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. A playwright, writer of fiction, journalist and poet, he was politically temperamental during his days in the

Pen League, setting standards against superficiality and hypocrisy in literature. Featured often on the pages of *The New York Times*, his most familiar works are his biography of Gibran Khalil Gibran and *The Book of Mirdad*, written after he had turned to eastern philosophies for solace and guidance in 1932. While his poetry was written in the United States, it was never translated into English, except in anthologies, such as *Grape Leaves, A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988), edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa.

Similarly, Elia Abu Madi was also never translated even though he was considered the most capable and sublime of the Al-Mahjar writers. His topics spanned themes from love to war. Like the other writers of his group, he was strongly philosophical and political, but Madi and the other Pen League writers didn't apologize or explain themselves as Arabs to the American audience. While many articles in *Syrian World* addressed issues of American-ness, most often in a positive light, the works of these writers weighed on the side of universality. Almost all the writers wrote in Arabic, although they were read beyond their own circles.

The Pen League thinned out, and by the 1940s had disappeared. Arab writers -- both immigrants and children of immigrants -- were not acknowledged as a group and did not write often of heritage or culture. An apparent exception is *Syrian Yankee*, a 1943 novel by Salom Rizk, a Syrian American, an immigrant story with the undertone of assimilation and acceptance.

During the years roughly from the late 1940s through the early 1980s, there was little identification by writers as to their status as Arab Americans. Nonetheless, in this transition period, strong independent poets came to the fore. Samuel John Hazo, D.H. Mehlem and Etel Adnan distinguished themselves initially as writers independent of ethnic categorization who later donned the cloak of the Arab-American identity. Hazo, founder and director of the International Poetry Forum at the University of Pittsburgh, has been active in poetry for nearly 30 years, acting as mentor for generations of promising young writers. In 1993 he was appointed the first official State Poet of Pennsylvania. His own work reflects a strong connection to place, and the

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importance of observation and wonder. A recent collection, *The Holy Surprise of Now: Selected and New Poems* (1996), illustrates the range and luminescence of his almost 20 books.

The poets of this time were not only a bridge between the two highly enculturated generations, but also direct links between Arab American writing and the American literary canon. D.H. Mehlem, a winner of the American Book Award, has developed a recognition of importance of the underrepresented cultures in American literature. Her critical studies of African American writers -- in particular Gwendolyn Brooks -- have been highly praised. In addition, Mehlem has helped mainstream Arab American literature by organizing the first Arab American poetry reading at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984.

Etel Adnan, whose reputation is more international than American, has advanced the placement of Arab American literature by creating her own publishing company, The Post-Apollo Press. Her poetry, her fiction and her reportage (*Of Cities and Women*, 1993) focus on the Middle East and political and military turmoil, specifically in Beirut. In her novel, *Sitt Marie-Rose* (1991), she writes about cross-cultural separation against the backdrop of the social texture of the city of Beirut itself.

Adnan, Hazo and Mehlem, along with the elegant, ironic verse of Joseph Awad, have paved the way for the current generation of Arab American writers, of which they are still very much a part. While identifying oneself according to cultural heritage was not recommended before the 1970s and 1980s, political climate and literary trends began to insist upon it. With the resurgence of the black American voice in the late 1960s, other multicultural groups began to demand a place in U.S. history and literature. Still, it would be more than a decade before Arab American writers would achieve this status.

The catalytic publication was a small volume of poetry, *Grape Leaves*, edited by Gregory Orfaea in 1982. Before that date, there had been no such collection of verse resonating similar themes and sensibilities. By 1988, bookshelves welcomed the

expanded anthology by Orfaea and Elmusa, as well as *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna Cadi (1994), and, most recently, *Jusoor's Post Gibrán Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, edited by Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash (1999). These volumes, supported by newspapers such as *Al Jadid* and the magazine *Mizna*, provide a home for both Arab American writers who focus on themes of culture and identity and those who do not. These collections provide readers and scholars with a resource center for Arab American writers as well as an opportunity to evaluate the collective voices.

Three facts become apparent upon examining existing Arab American collections. First, Arab American literature now originates from writers whose backgrounds include all Arab countries, including North Africa and the Gulf, rather than only representatives of the Levant. Second, the themes of Arab American writing are not limited to issues of culture and identity, but are extensive and far-reaching. Today, Arab American writers are going beyond stories and poems that are linked to the homeland and heritage. Their expressions explore new vistas -- related to years spent living in the United States -- and domestic political and social issues that affect their everyday lives. Third, there has been a noticeable increase in women's voices in Arab American literature, ever since the 1970s and the advent of Mehlem and Adnan. In the main, this has been part of the national trend in the United States, ever since the rise of the women's movement in the late 1960s. In the wake of Mehlem and Adnan have come many others.

**M**any of the strongest poets in the United States, outside any classification, have Arab origins. Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American, has been repeatedly recognized as an outstanding poet, writer of prose and anthologist. While she instills a sense of culture into her poems, it can often refer to a culture she owns, visits or has invented. Nye has written books for children and has gathered together poems and paintings from Arab writers and artists from around the globe in her anthology, *The Space Between Our Footsteps* (1998). Other outstanding books by Nye include *Never in a Hurry: Essays on People and Places* (1996), *Benito's Dream Bottle* (1995) and *Habibi* (1997).

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Some of the understanding and presence of Arab American writing is a result of writers who have developed a scholarly domain for studying this work. Evelyn Shakir, a professor at Bentley College, has opened the corridors of this scholarship with her book, *Bint Arab* (1997), in which she offers portraits, through personal narratives, of Arab women striking the delicate balance between their own cultural traditions and the way of life and opportunities they find in the United States. In addition, writer and poet Lisa Suhair Majaj has developed critical studies of the development of Arab American writing. In an essay that is both historical and politically astute, Majaj suggests that "...we need not stronger and more definitive boundaries of identity, but rather an expansion and a transformation of these boundaries. In broadening and deepening our understanding of ethnicity, we are not abandoning our Arabness, but making room for the complexity of our experiences." Majaj, and other scholars such as Loretta Hall and Bridget K. Hall, creators of the exhaustive volume *Arab American Biography* (1999), follow the work of Orfalea and Elmusa in creating the all-important compendia that many rely on as a premier resource for Arab American writing.

Some writers of Arab American origin have found success beyond more esoteric, scholarly audiences by appealing to mainstream readers. The best example today is Mona Simpson, whose 1987 novel, *Anywhere But Here* -- the story of an irrepressible single mother and her impressionable teenaged daughter -- was adapted as a Hollywood studio film in 1999, starring Susan Sarandon and Natalie Portman. Simpson is the author of two more recent stories, *The Lost Father* (1991) and *A Regular Guy* (1996). Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993), also was well-received by a wide readership. Abu-Jaber pulls no punches in her portrayals of life within the Arab community that are both self-effacing and funny, bittersweet and nostalgic. By refreshing the memory, she keeps the questions of survival alive.

Alongside *Arabian Jazz* is *Through and Through*, a collection of short stories by Joseph Geha that provides a brilliant, passionate glimpse into the Lebanese community in Toledo, Ohio -- matching Abu-Jaber's self-ironic coloration in a sometimes tense political atmosphere.

True to Arab tradition, contemporary poets within the Arab American community write with passion and commitment about identity, culture and life, and represent many styles and voices. Elmusa makes this point in one poem, when he implores "poets, critics/members of other tribes,/please let's not reduce the poetry/of the tribe/into a sheepskin of poems/about the tribe." His request has been heeded by many Arab American poets, who -- as with writers from varied cultural traditions outside the mainstream -- make the complexities of identity and place the focal points of their work and persona.

The new generation is responding to styles and concerns that seem distant from the roots of Gibran and Rihani. Suheir Hammad, for example, in volumes such as *Drops of This Story* (1996), recognizes a kinship between her background and the African American voice. In *Heifers and Heroes* (1999), she evokes a broad cultural awareness -- using an advertising icon, the Marlboro Man -- to evoke life in the inner city streets. She and others in this new generation are closer to the universality of the Al Mahjar, too, in their experimentation with rap and spoken word, vernacular and performance art. Natalie Handal's spoken word recording, *the never field*, is filled with impermeable truths that arise from the work -- specific to the history, and particular to the contemporary literary world, but expansive beyond in ideas, something that was a specialty of the Al Mahjar generation. Indeed, the spoken word as art form might have been dear to Gibran, as he wrote plays and experimented with forms that had broad appeal.

Clearly the Arab American poets are not mired in a tradition of mere homage and nostalgia, or adhere to safe forms and styles that allow them to be easily categorized. Rather, they appear everywhere -- from open microphone readings to contemporary coffee house poetry competitions (familarly known as "slams") to the pages of respected poetry anthologies and literary journals. In October 1999, a number traveled to Chicago for an historic event --

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the first Arab American Writers Conference, organized by a fellow Arab American author, Ray Hanania, whose website ([www.hanania.com](http://www.hanania.com)) is a center for up-to-date information about Arab American literature, culture and politics.

The literature of Arab American writers continues to evolve as a cultural representation and as a literary accomplishment. The new generation of writers, including spoken word performers and rap artists, attend to the matters of their time as well as

to the concerns of history. They follow the great tradition of Al-Mahjar. As the children of Gibran, Naimy, Rihani, and Madi, these writers will continue to make their marks and influence American literature. ■

*Elmaz Abinader is professor of creative writing at Mills College in Oakland, California, and a recognized poet, playwright and performance artist.*



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## PROFILE:

ELMAZ ABINADER -- IN THE MIX

From her base in northern California, Elmaz Abinader is one of the more luminous and multifaceted Arab American writers of the day, an award-winning artist of Lebanese origin and an educator.

Her creative origins are that of a poet -- beginning with studies at Columbia University, where she received her master of fine arts degree in poetry and a doctorate in creative writing. For her post-doctoral fellowship in the humanities, Abinader worked on what was to be her first major published volume, *Children of the Roojme, A Family's Journey From Lebanon*. Her adviser was the prominent African American novelist, Nobel literature laureate Toni Morrison

Published in 1991, *Children of the Roojme* spans four generations and two continents. It traces the Abinaders from their homeland to small-town western Pennsylvania, and the journey of the mind and heart from centuries-old surroundings to a new and unfamiliar land, with different traditions and cultures. A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* praised her for conveying "the yearnings and ambivalence of the quintessential American figure, the immigrant, whose story is woven tightly with a sense of connection to the land and the people left behind."

In the course of the 1990s, while teaching creative writing at Mills College in Oakland, California,

Abinader has continued to march along her personal creative path.

In addition to a volume of verse, *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999), her major work has been a performance piece, *Country of Origin*, which she has presented across the United States and in the Middle East. This three-act one-woman show depicts the lives of a trio of Arab American women and their individual and communal struggles. In it, Abinader becomes her grandmother and mother, and also portrays herself as a young girl. The music fuses age-old Middle Eastern strains with contemporary jazz, with instruments ranging from nai (flute) and oud to drums, violins and saxophones.

Abinader wears the mantle of Arab American writer proudly. In the first place, in her craft circle, she has kept in touch with her colleagues. "At first there was a core group of us that kept in contact with one another all along," she said in a recent interview. "The conference [of Arab American writers] we had in Chicago in October 1999 was a manifestation of something that had been going on for years. Now we have become a bigger group -- people from the [U.S.] South, North, West, people who have immigrated recently and people who have been here a while."

How does she see the state of play of Arab American writers and intellectuals at this point in history?

"We live in a very exciting moment, with a lot of movement. There is a reaching out now, a mixture of traditions, all coming together. For instance, I find

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myself talking a lot to other Arab writers about magic realism in Latin American writing. We now seem to share an interest in Latin American literature, and see mutual influences going and coming between us.”

The trends she sees existing today generally relate to younger writers.

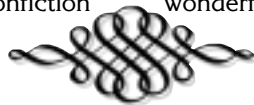
“They set the new trends,” she explains. “The poetry slams could be very instrumental for making poetry accessible to the public, for example. They are a mixture of dramatic forms. Creative nonfiction -- memoir, biography -- are now popular, and we very much have a place in that. In

terms of the new generation, I think our writers are right there in the mix.”

Despite the fact that getting published and having a market appeal remain two of the challenges facing writers in her discipline today, she is quite sanguine regarding the number and quality of contemporary Arab American works on bookshelves and in college courses.

“We have such a rich body of people now. It’s a wonderful time to be an Arab American writer.”

-- Mofid Deak



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## OTHER ARAB AMERICAN WRITERS

The works of **JOSEPH GEHA**, a Lebanese-born writer, are housed in a permanent collection at the Arab-American Archive of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Born in 1944, he is best known for his book *Through and Through: Toledo Stories* (1990), in which he explores the intriguing world of the Lebanese- and Syrian-Christian émigré communities of Toledo (Ohio) from the 1920s to the present day. Geha, a professor of English at Iowa State University (Ames), typically writes about families from the Middle East and the conflicts within an immigrant culture. His other works include *Holy Toledo* (1987) and a one-act play, *The Pigeon* (1990).

**SAMUEL HAZO**, a poet of Lebanese and Syrian heritage, is a legendary writer of verse, educator and advocate on behalf of poetry. He has received considerable critical acclaim for his anthologies, among them *Silence Spoken Here* (1992) and *The Past Won't Stay Behind You* (1993). While the eloquently presented themes of his poetry -- suffering, aging and death -- have remained the same through the years, the form of his poetry has moved away from the structured, rhythmic style of his early collections. In her review of Hazo's 1996 collection of poems, *The Holy Surprise of Right Now*, Mary Zoghby writes, “One could hardly name another contemporary American poet of his stature who is his

equal in knowledge of Arabic culture, Arabic history, and the Arabic language.” Hazo has been a professor, and now is professor emeritus, of English at Duquesne University (Pittsburgh) for decades, where he founded the International Poetry Forum in 1966. In 1993, he was named State Poet of Pennsylvania. As part of his lifelong campaign for greater awareness of the beauty of poetry, he convinced his local daily, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, to publish a poem each week in its Saturday edition.

**DIANA ABŪ-JABER** is a native of upstate New York, born in 1959, who moved with her family to Jordan when she was seven. Currently writer-in-residence at Portland State University (Oregon), she has lived, at various times in her life, in Jordan and in the United States, and has taught literature and creative writing at the University of Michigan, the University of Oregon and the University of California at Los Angeles. She began writing, she has said, in order to “constitute myself -- as the child of Arab immigrants -- as a ‘whole’ person. Writing is wonderfully healing.” Her first novel, *Arabian Jazz* (1993), focused on an émigré from Jordan living with his two grown daughters in a town with poor, mostly white inhabitants akin to the one in which Abu-Jaber spent her childhood. *Arabian Jazz* won the Oregon Book Award and was a finalist for the national PEN/Hemingway Award.

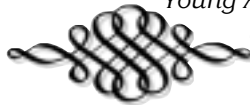
The daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother of German descent, **NAOMI SHIHAB NYE** was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1952. She moved back to Jordan as a young girl, and then returned to



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the United States, to San Antonio, Texas, where she has lived since the middle of high (secondary) school. Increasingly, she has been recognized for her poetry and has emerged as a leading figure in Southwestern poetry, articulating the female psyche of the region in her works. In 1995 she was featured in the U.S. public television series "The Language of Life with Bill Moyers," and her thoughts and selections of her poetry are collected in Moyers' book of the same title. Besides her poetry, in volumes such as *The Words Under the Words* (1995), *The Space Between Our Footsteps* (1998) and *What Have You Lost?* (1999), Nye has written essays, children's books and music, and has recorded her verse as well. One of her popular novels for young readers, *Sitti's Secrets* (1994), concerns the bond linking an Arab American child's relationship and her grandmother, still living back home in a Palestinian village. *Habibi* (1997) is her first young adult novel, about an Arab-American teenager.

**MONA SIMPSON**, born in Wisconsin in 1957 of Syrian-American parentage, emerged from the new generation of American writers during the 1980s. Contemporary Authors notes that her highly acclaimed novels "explore the complex ties in families torn apart by divorce or abandonment, usually focusing on daughters, their wayward mothers, and absent fathers." Her first novel, *Anywhere but Here* (1987), received broad critical acclaim. It chronicles the powerful story of an peripatetic, impulsive mother, Adele August, and the emotional pain she inflicts on her young daughter, Ann. It was adapted as a film in 1999. Her second novel, *The Lost Father* (1991), continues the story of Ann, now grown, as she begins a search for her absent father, an Egyptian immigrant to the United States who abandoned his family. Her third novel, *A Regular Guy* (1996), returns to the theme of a daughter, her unconventional mother and her absent father. Simpson's selection in 1996 as one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists secures her place in U.S. contemporary literature.

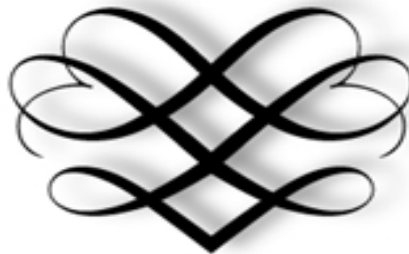


-- Suzanne Dawkins

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# ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE: LEAVENING THE MOSAIC

BY SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM



U.S. novelist Henry James once noted that it takes a lot of history to produce the flowering of literature. In that light, the speed with which new Asian American literature is surfacing might be considered a form of encapsulated history, an enthusiastic response from mainstream U.S. literary circles to the belated appearance of Asian Americans on the U.S. consciousness. At the same time, it suggests that the task of evaluation is both urgent and complex.

Evaluation of a marginal yet emerging and rapidly transforming tradition should avoid definitive criteria drawn from different literary traditions. This does not imply that evaluation is not useful or possible. On the contrary, because emerging literatures are more conflict-situated, provisional and transitory, they must incorporate their own self-reflexive, interrogative, critical discourses -- in other words, a self-evaluation.

A survey of the publishers' lists on Asian American writing shows that in the 1990s, this discipline became, to use a colloquial phrase, a "hot property." Its popularity in the early days of the new century can be generally linked to the success of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to such African American authors as W.E.B. Du Bois of the early 20th century and Toni Morrison of more recent vintage, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1978), the first Asian American work to receive wide

acclaim, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), which established that writer as a best-selling author, have given rise to other writers whose works are of such a range of appeal as to be found in supermarkets and college bookstores alike.

Scholarly and popular interest in Asian American literature is of recent vintage, finding its direct roots in student activism at San Francisco State and the University of California at Berkeley, among other places in the United States in the late 1960s, that led to the creation of interdisciplinary ethnic studies programs. Today, courses in Asian American literature are common throughout U.S. higher education. As a result, this body of writing has expanded not only in visibility, but also -- more significantly -- in achievement.

Journals such as *Bridge* in New York City, and *Amerasia*, created at the University of California at Los Angeles, were vital forces in increasing awareness of selected Asian American writers. This interest, which intensified in the last two decades among mainstream U.S. readers and publishing houses, has brought with it renewed opportunities and, ironically, a crisis of representation. One sign of this crisis is the internal debate that swirls around efforts to define a "canon" of texts -- a list of the best or most significant writing -- and to agree upon a fixed curriculum. In that regard, as discussions revolve around provisionality and temporality, Asian American literature is a particularly shifting, oft-contested field.

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How, at the outset, does one define the boundaries of Asian American literature? Three early anthologies, *Asian-American Authors* (1972), *Asian-American Heritage* (1974) and *Aiiieeeee!* (1975), suggested that the “melting pot” paradigm was inadequate to an understanding of Asian American cultural identity. At the same time, influenced by the 1960s black civil rights movement, the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* -- who later published plays, novels, short stories and poetry -- argued that Asian American “sensibility” was an American phenomenon distinctively different from and unrelated to Asian cultural sources. But this point of view evaporated over the years, in the face of increased Asian immigration during the last quarter of the 20th century.

Thanks to that influx, the Asian percentage of the U.S. population has increased from 0.5 percent to more than three percent. Interestingly, *Aiiieeeee!* focused only on Chinese and Japanese-American authors, almost all of them male. By comparison, in the 25 years since the groundbreaking anthology appeared, U.S. bookstores have been filled with the works of Americans of Filipino, Malaysian, Indian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, Korean and other descents, with women widely and notably represented.

Usually, Asian American literature has been assessed by reviewers and critics from the single perspective of race. In other words, the literature is read as centered on the identity position of Americans of Asian descent and within the context of Asian American immigration histories and legislative struggles against unjust policies and racial violence. The truth is that different immigration histories of national-origin communities give rise to writings reflective of cross-generational concerns and styles. Chinese-language poems written by immigrant Chinese on the barracks walls of Angel Island (the site of immigrants’ arrivals on the U.S. West Coast) between 1910 and 1940, and Issei (first-generation Japanese American) *tankas* (Japanese verse form) have been translated. Each has added to the archival “canon” of Asian American literature. The stories and essays of Edith Eaton (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, 1910), who took the pen name of Sui Sin Far to signify her adoption of the Chinese half of her ancestry, focused on the problems facing Chinese and those of “mixed race,” or as she calls them

“Eurasians,” in the United States of the early 20th-century. Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1946) follows a Filipino immigrant as he and other migrant workers struggle for social justice and acceptance. Each is part of the Asian-American tradition.

In the period before the burst of new writing of the postwar era and even later, memoirs were the favored genre with immigrant and first-generation writers. (This is true of other ethnic literature as well.) Younghill Kang’s *The Grass Roof* (1931), Pardee Lowe’s *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943), and Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) satisfied a mainstream audience’s curiosity about the strangers in its midst. Indeed, Japanese American World War II internment experiences were a major subject for memoirs and autobiographical poetry across the postwar decades, as reflected in Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1956), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), and Mitsuye Yamada’s poems in *Desert Run* (1988).

But the Asian American writing communities were far from limited to one era and venue, and to one discipline of literature. Writers communicated, and continue to communicate, across a range of genres -- including fiction, poetry, drama and oral history.

The first novel published by a U.S.-born Japanese American (or Nisei) was John Okada’s *No No Boy* (1957), one year after Chinese American Diana Chang’s *The Frontiers of Love* received respectful attention. The swift pace of literary production since then indicates that the trajectory of the Asian American literary tradition is still in formation -- imaginatively so.

The range of achievement in recent years is quite impressive. After the awards garnered by Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, other Asian American works found welcome readers and audiences. Cathy Song’s novel *Picture Bride* and Garrett Hongo’s collection of verse, *The River of Heaven*, helped solidify the reputation of the Asian American writing community

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in the 1980s, as did *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang's startling theatrical piece, and Philip K. Gotanda's drama, *The Wash*.

As Tan emerged with *The Joy Luck Club* and Kingston continued her rise with *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), other writers like Bharati Mukherjee (*Jasmine*) came to the fore. Debut novels by Chinese American Gish Jen (*Typical American*), Korean American Chang-rae Lee (*Native Speaker*) and Vietnamese American Lan Cao (*Monkey Bridge*) all were warmly received. In 1999, Chinese American writer Ha Jin won the National Book Award for *Waiting*, his first novel, set against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution. In short fiction, such writers as David Wong Louie (*Pangs of Love and Other Stories*, 1991), Wakako Yamauchi (*Songs My Mother Taught Me*, 1994) and Lan Samantha Chang (*Hunger*, 1998) have been similarly acclaimed.

This range of achievement speaks to the diversity of thematic concerns in Asian American literature that parallels contemporary Asian American heterogeneity. Asian American works are not situated in, nor do they contribute to, a cohesive and united tradition. Rather, certain cultural elements appear to be shared by authors from varying histories and origins. Similar concerns may be seen to arise from a particular East Asian world view, from patriarchal constructions of kinship and gender, and from shared experiences of struggle and isolation in the new world of the United States. And yet, no single tradition underlies the variant strategies and techniques that characterize the achievement of Asian American literature.

The fact is that heterogeneous representations -- in literature as in society -- help to overturn the stereotype of "inscrutable" Asian Americans. (When Filipina-American Jessica Hagedorn titled her recent anthology of Asian American literature *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, there was more than a touch of irony in this reference to the heroic, yet stereotypical Asian American detective protagonist in the 1930s era novels of Anglo-American writer Earl Derr Biggers and their film adaptations.)

Until recently, Asian American studies accepted a limited psychosocial notion of the stereotype. Psychologists such as Stanley Sue argued that Euro-

Americans historically justified their discrimination against Asian Americans on popular prejudices that denigrated immigrants as inferior, diseased, and unwelcome. This unfortunate 19th-century negative stereotype has given way in our day to a positive stereotype of the Asian American as educated, hard-working and successful, a model minority, a depiction that is finding a growing presence in literature as well, even as it is the subject of continued debate within the community.

Another theme, operating alongside race analysis, is gender analysis, with many works recounting Asian American women's struggles against traditional patriarchal attitudes. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is one example -- a complex series of narratives about growing up in a community structured along gender and race lines.

As in most traditional societies, gender roles in Asian American communities have tended to be fixed and communally scrutinized. The tensions these strictures have caused surfaced over the past decade in such anthologies of Asian American writing as *Home to Stay* (1990) and *Our Feet Walk the Sky* (1993). Generally, the high esteem centering on male children brought loftier economic and social expectation of sons. Daughters were expected to marry and to become part of their husbands' households. Indeed, the dominant view throughout East Asian societies was that women were subject first to fathers, then to husbands, and then -- if widowed -- to their sons.

**I**mmigration to the United States, a society in which male and female roles are more fluidly and more freely defined, put traditional social values under stress. It follows that this development has affected literature. The works of the younger generation, such as Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) and Vietnamese-American writer Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), express the confusions arising from the gap between their desires for self-reliance and individual happiness and their immigrant mothers' expectations. But even at an earlier date, just after World War II, Jade Snow Wong and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, in writing about growing up female, had made similar reflections about gender bias in their families.

It is true, of course, that gender roles often are presented as a function of culture. South Asian

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American women writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Bapsi Sidhwa (*An American Brat*, 1994) have focused on the cross-cultural tensions that arise when crossing national borders. Asian American male characters face a crisis in understanding the significance of manhood — in books such as Louie’s *Pangs of Love* and Gus Lee’s *China Boy* (1991). In love or in the family unit, therefore, Asian Americans have had to negotiate conflicting ideals of male and female identities.

Another major theme in Asian American writing is the relationship between parents and children. This, too, has an historical and social underpinning. In years past, because of the language barriers that faced immigrant Asian Americans, the point of view of the American-born, second-generation Asian American sons and daughters usually prevailed in their literature. As early as 1943, Lowe’s autobiography, *Father and Glorious Descendant*, gave U.S. readers the character of a dominant father within a strong, cohesive ethnic community.

While second-generation children often reject their parents’ social expectations, immigrant parents are not simply flat representations of static societies. They are also individuals who had broken away from their original communities in moving to the United States. As a result, the U.S.-born Asian American writers portray complex parental characters who are themselves double figures. Works by Yamamoto and Yamauchi depict mother-daughter relationships that are prone to conflict and tensions that are not only familial, but also gender-based. Lan Samantha Chang’s evocative short stories in *Hunger* further exemplify such writing.

Parent-child relationships are not merely signified as a set of themes but also as patterns of narrative strategies – points of view, plots, characters, voices and language choices. Who the center of consciousness is in the poem or story affects the flow of identity for the reader. The range of voices and tones given to the speakers tells us whether the parents are non-English-speaking immigrants or bilingual speakers, and whether or not the children differ vastly from their parents in cultural attitudes and values. What is seldom in doubt is the central significance of the parent-child relationship in these

works, illuminating the primary social role that families play in Asian American communities.

Some of these works are also pegged to regions. For example, the narratives of Okada, Toshio Mori and Kingston are set specifically in enclaves on the U.S. West Coast, while Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) takes place in New York City’s Chinatown, a continent away. Works emanating from Hawaii, such as Milton Murayama’s novel *All I Asking for Is My Body* (1975), and Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s poems and fictions in *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre* (1993) and *Blu’s Hanging* (1998), express a strong island identity and use English registers and dialect resources specific to Hawaiian colloquialism. Similar island-identified themes and stylistic registers are evident in anthologies and titles published by Hawaii’s Bamboo Ridge Press.

Invariably, there has been a move toward postmodernist techniques present as well in recent years. Works by younger contemporary authors, such as novelist Cynthia Kadohata’s *In the Valley of the Heart* (1993) and the dramas of playwrights Hwang and Gotanda match Kingston’s tour-de-force novel *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989). They experiment with such on-the-edge techniques as parody, irony and pastiche to challenge the interlocking categories of race, class and gender, and to include sexual identity as one of the central themes of identity. Using similar techniques, Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (1990), set in the Philippines, critiques historical U.S. colonialism and the Marcos regime while celebrating Filipino cultural fusions.

Single-genre anthologies offer a wide spectrum of styles and voices. *The Open Boat* (1993) and *Premonitions* (1995) indicate new directions in poetry. *Charlie Chan Is Dead* (1993) and *Into the Fire* (1996) introduce readers to recent fiction. And two 1993 anthologies, *The Politics of Life* and *Unbroken Thread*, record what is happening in drama. There is a healthy heterogeneity evident as well in recent anthologies focusing on individual national origins, such as *Living In America* (1995), the reflections of South Asian Americans, and *Watermark* (1998), a collection of writings by Vietnamese Americans, as well as a newly-published volume, *Southeast Asian American Writing: Tilting the Continent* (2000). And certainly there is a rich variety of communal identities, genres and styles to

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be found in recent general anthologies, including Shawn Wong's *Asian American Literature* (1996).

Taken together, the goal of these anthologies is to provide satisfactory access to the provocative, challenging and original works produced in the last century. Striking a balance between well-known, acclaimed works and newer writing, the selections typically reflect considerations of both historical and thematic significance and literary quality, a criterion that often is the subject of healthy and vociferous debate. Together, though, the diversity of styles, genres, and voices testifies to the vitality of Asian American writing.

Ultimately, this diversity has, at its core, transnationalism -- a global movement of cultures, people and capital. This new phenomenon has caused writers to create new identities for people -- and for themselves. The Asian American rubric is a melange of emigres, refugees, exiles and immigrants who have been coming to the United States for decades, continuing to write and be published here. Until recently, though, a number had maintained their identities of origin and even had returned to their native lands later in life. An example is the well-known Chinese writer and Columbia University scholar Lin Yu-Tang, who returned to Taiwan after his retirement from teaching. Despite having written a novel set in the United States, *Chinatown Family*, a half-century ago, he has not been classified as an Asian American author.

Today, clearly, these national identity borders are viewed as more porous, a result of and contributing factor toward a globalization of cultures and of the world's economies under the forces of free market operations, paralleled by a shift toward a greater transnational construction of U.S. identity. Émigré, migrant or transnational writers such as Korean Americans Chang-rae Lee and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Indonesian American Li-Young Lee, Malaysian American Shirley Geok-lin Lim, South Asian Americans Meena Alexander, Chitra Davakaruni

and Bapsi Sidhwa -- as well as Hagedorn and Cao -- are constructing strikingly new American identities that contrast sharply with, for example, the Eurocentric model of capitalism in its early stages that J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur described more than 200 years ago in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). The transnational identities of the 21st century emerge, by contrast, at a moment of capitalism in its maturity, and are dependent upon global exchanges.

The novels of Lee, Cao and Jin require consciousness of bicultural, binational aesthetics and linguistic formation. The fictions of Jin (who arrived in the United States in 1985), for example, set in China of the past 30 years, while new, are different from the newness of U.S.-born writers such as Kingston, whose attempts to recover an ethnic history result in explorations of reverse migrations, from the United States to a China she had never seen.

In reading Asian American literature, then, we are reminded that critics and teachers must mediate between new texts and historically constructed U.S. literary traditions, between social locations and literary identities of the communities for and to which the texts are speaking. Together, recent works of Asian American authors -- transnational, immigrant and native Americans alike -- underscore the phenomenon of rapid publication and the continuous reinvention of Asian American cultural identity. In deliberately placing these writers of varied origins together, the growing canon of Asian American writing suggests a collective set of new American identities that are flexibly transnational and multicultural and that help leaven the multinational mosaic that has historically shaped the United States. ■

*Shirley Geok-lin Lim, currently on a leave of absence from her professorship at the University of California at Santa Barbara, is serving as chair professor of English at the University of Hong Kong.*



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## PROFILE:

CHANG-RAE LEE -- THE CAST OF HIS BELONGING

For Chang-rae Lee, it all began with his father.

"My father came first," the lauded Korean-American novelist said in a recent *New York Times* interview, describing his family's migration to the United States slightly more than 30 years ago.

Everything else -- transit eastward to a new world with his mother and sister, considerable educational opportunities at private schools and Yale University, the decision to forsake a promising financial career to fulfill his creative impulses as a writer, his well-received first two novels, his naming by *The New Yorker* magazine as one of the 20 most promising writers for the 21st century, and the numerous honors he has attained -- followed the choice his father made. (The older Lee was a physician in Korea; he became a psychiatrist in the United States after learning English.) And Lee has accomplished all of this before reaching his middle 30s.

Lee's 1995 debut novel, *Native Speaker*, gained the young author -- then under 30 -- the prestigious Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for a first novel. It focused on a Korean immigrant's son who works as a privately employed corporate spy, wrestles with an imperiled marriage and the death of a son, and becomes involved in political intrigue. His estranged wife describes him as politically and emotionally alien, and he is, truthfully, a man living in two worlds yet belonging to neither of them.

Gish Jen, herself a rising Asian American writer, called *Native Speaker* "beautifully crafted, enlightening and heart-wrenching...a brilliant debut and a tremendous contribution to Asian American literature." *The New York Times Book Review* hailed it as "rapturous." And the attention and awards began to flow his way.

The book was quite an accomplishment for a writer who has acknowledged, in a number of interviews, the overwhelming power of the word for him. "Word choices are life and death for me," he told *Newsday* in September 1999, noting that until he entered grade school, he spoke only Korean. "Over the course of two years, I went from one language, lost it, and

picked up another." As flawless and as lyrical as his writing is, he still fears that he isn't using English correctly.

Yet he prevails. His most recent book is *A Gesture Life*. Published in the fall of 1999, it presents, again, an outsider as protagonist. Told in two timeframes, it introduces readers to Franklin Hata, a Japanese-American of Korean birth, who is carving out a life for himself as a pharmacist in the suburban United States in the postwar years, albeit amidst family tensions. But there is another side to his history -- his service as a medical officer during World War II that entangled him in some of that era's horrors. And as the two facets of his experience come together, so do the two worlds of the immigrant do as well.

"There is something exemplary to the sensation of near perfect lightness," Hata observes of his dichotomous state, "of being in a place and not being there, which seems of course a chronic condition of my life but then, too, its everyday uncton, the trouble finding a remedy but not quite a cure, so that the problem naturally proliferates until it has become you through and through. Such is the cast of my belonging, molding to whatever is at hand."

This time, critics were even stronger in praising his work. *The New York Times'* Michiko Kakutani called the novel "wise and humane," and Leslie Brody, in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, described Lee as "an original."

Today, as he directs the master of fine arts program at Hunter College, part of the City University of New York, he is working on his third novel, set in the 1950s among a group of U.S. soldiers in Korea during the war there. For him, he says, it represents an opportunity to consider anew people who find themselves in places possibly not of their own choosing, and who must determine how to make a life there for a period of time. It represents for him, he told a *New York Times* interviewer, "that feeling of both citizenship and exile, of always being an expatriate -- with all the attendant problems and complications and delight."

-- Michael J. Bandler



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## OTHER ASIAN AMERICAN WRITERS

Vietnamese American novelist and law professor **LAN CAO**, 28, has drawn on her heritage to write both fiction and nonfiction. Her semi-autobiographical novel, *Monkey Bridge* (1997), describes the flight to freedom in the United States by a mother and her teenage daughter at the end of the Vietnam War, depicting how each deals with the challenges of a new life. The book distinctly mirrors Lan Cao's experiences; her family was among those anti-Communist Vietnamese airlifted to safety. New York Times critic Michiko Kakutani noted Cao's "sensitive job of delineating the complicated relationship between a mother and a daughter," concluding that "Cao has . . . made an impressive debut." The author also collaborated with Himilce Novas on *Everything You Need to Know About Asian American History* (1996), a nonfiction work providing information on Asian and Pacific Islander groups in the United States.

**JESSICA HAGEDORN** was born in the Philippines in 1949 and grew up there during the rule of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, immigrating to the United States during her teens. A poet and novelist, she also worked as a performance artist in New York City. Much of her poetry adapts the Beat style of Allen Ginsberg and others from the 1960s, and easily lends itself to performance. Hagedorn is known for her graphic poetry and prose, which focuses on life's more disturbing aspects, and her characters are often women or Asians alienated from society. An anthology, *Danger and Beauty*, representing nearly a quarter-century of her work, was published in 1993. Her first novel, *Dogeaters* (1987), an unflinching portrayal of Philippine life, was nominated for the National Book Award, and her second novel *Gangster of Love*, followed in 1996. In 1993, Hagedorn edited *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*.

Award winning poet **GARRETT HONGO** is the author of two books of verse, *Yellow Light* (1982) and *The River of Heaven* (1988), that explore the experiences of Asian Americans in U.S. society. Hongo, an American of Japanese descent, was born on Hawaii and raised in Los Angeles. Booklist's Donna Seaman notes that Hongo was "estranged from his culture, his homeland, and his family history until he returned to his place of birth." In *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawaii* (1995), Hongo describes his return to his birthplace in Hawaii to begin a quest to connect with his heritage and his past. In a conversation with Contemporary Authors, Hongo observed, "My project as a poet has been motivated by a search for origins of various kinds, a quest for ethnic and familial roots, cultural identity, and poetic inspiration...." Nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 1989 for *The River of Heaven*, Hongo has also edited several collections of poems and a book of essays on the Asian American experience.

**GISH JEN** -- also known as Lillian Jen -- was born in New York City in 1955. Her parents, who emigrated from China, worked hard to give their children the opportunities they were denied in China. While in high school she adopted the name "Gish" -- after the actress Lillian Gish. It took Jen a while to find her voice as a writer. She struggled through her first year of business school before realizing that she "had to become a writer or die." *Typical American* (1991), her first novel, was a resounding success and finalist for a National Book Critics Circle award. It, and its followup novel, *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), recount the often funny and sometimes tragic story of the immigrant Chang family, tracing how they slowly adjust to the United States and are transformed by changes that eventually drive them apart. Her latest volume, *Who's Irish?* (1999), is a collection of eight short stories that observe not only her own Chinese American ethnic group, but other U.S. ethnic groups as well.

**DAVID WONG LOUIE** was born in a suburb of New York City in 1954, the son of first-generation Chinese immigrants. His short stories were being published by some of the most prominent literary journals in the United States prior to the publication of *Pangs of Love and Other Stories* in 1991. *Pangs of Love* was



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received with much praise, winning the Los Angeles Times First Fiction Award and the Ploughshares First Book Award. It included Louie's widely acclaimed 1989 short story, "Displacement," in which an immigrant cleaning woman feigns ignorance of English as she silently suffers the verbal diatribes of her employer. Louie's new novel, *The Barbarians Are Coming*, which tells the story of a son's edgy relationship with his Chinese-American parents, is to be published in March 2000. Louie currently teaches creative writing and literature at the University of California at Los Angeles.

**BHARATI MUKHERJEE**, an Indian immigrant to the United States, has captured evocatively the South Asian -- particularly the Indian --immigrant experience in the United States in her dozen-plus novels, collections of short fiction, essays and works of nonfiction. Her early novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975), tell the story of the isolation of Indian expatriates. In these earlier works Mukherjee was seen as an Indian writing in English, but in her third book, a collection of short stories titled *Darkness* (1985), she began to write with the voice of a North American immigrant author. With *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1989), Mukherjee's shift in point of view is complete, as she paints an even broader portrait of the North American immigrant experience. In *Jasmine* (1989), she explores female identity through an Indian

peasant woman whose travels to different locales in the United States increasingly solidify her identity in this country. *The Holder of the World* (1993), said to be her most accomplished recent work, turns to the subject of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Mukherjee is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

**BAPSY SIDHWA** has been called Pakistan's leading English-language novelist. Born in Karachi in 1938, she moved to the United States in 1983. Her first three novels -- *The Crow Eaters* (1983), *The Bride* (1983) and *Ice-Candy-Man* (1989) -- take place in her homeland, exploring the post-colonial Pakistani identity. Anita Desai has said that Sidhwa has "a passion for history and for truth telling" -- and this passion is exhibited in each of her first three novels, as she tries to understand the dramatic events leading to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the subsequent birth of Pakistan as a nation. Her "richly comic" fourth novel, *An American Brat* (1994), looks at the immigrant experience in the United States as she chronicles a young Parsi girl's exposure to American culture in the late 1970s. Sidhwa's short stories and articles have been published in numerous anthologies.

-- S.D.



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# BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE AT YEAR 2000:

## A NEW PRESENCE

BY ROBERT B. STEPTO



**D**uring the 1960s, as the civil rights movement expanded, there was a feeling in U.S. literary circles that black American literature was in the midst of a second renaissance, following the Harlem Renaissance of the pre-World War II era.

A case certainly could be made for this view. The 1960s saw the emergence of the Negro Ensemble Company in New York City, and countless smaller theater troupes across the country, as well as the more radical black arts movement in both drama and poetry. Publications proliferated, from new titles from major publishing houses to new journals to extensive efforts to republish hundreds of out-of-print titles -- such as the reissuance, in 1969, of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Furthermore, the first courses in black American literature appeared in the catalogs of a number of colleges and universities. On the one hand, students worked toward graduation by studying black American literature; on the other hand, a demand suddenly sprang up for qualified teachers of this literature.

What began in the 1960s surged in the decades that followed, and surely appears to be continuing as a movement and as a literary tradition at the turn of the new century. This expansion has been so dramatic that one is tempted to say that the second renaissance is over, not because "the Negro is no longer in vogue" (the fate of the Harlem Renaissance), but because the black American is both in vogue and in the mainstream. It is fair to say

that if the Depression of the 1930s killed the Renaissance of that era, prosperity has enabled the second renaissance to thrive. Today, black American literature is no longer so marginal, so novel or so limited in its readerships that its fate is uncertain. Today, virtually every strand of writing in the United States includes a wealth of prominent black American authors, to the extent that no one definition of the black American writer prevails.

While it is obvious that black American talents are working in all major literary genres, what may be less obvious is what new directions they are taking within those disciplines. In fiction, for example, while historical accounts are not new, what does seem intriguing is the fresh effort to write the stories of slavery. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), for instance -- which may have been the catalyst for her Nobel Prize for Literature -- is a striking example of the new imagining of slavery. Rather than offering the familiar tale of the revolt-leading male slave (versions of which began in 1853 with Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*), it presents the story of Sethe, a female ex-slave who killed her child rather than see her subjugated. Then, too, Charles Johnson's stories and novels are fresh in terms of vision and sensibility. The opening premise in his National Book Award-winning 1990 novel, *The Middle Passage*, is that the Negro hero is so hapless that when he stows away aboard a ship to avoid marriage he unwittingly chooses a slave ship. This is the essence of blues humor, born of slavery. Yet it took until a decade ago for an author to risk finding that humor in the story of

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the agonizing middle passage from Africa to the Americas that was at the heart of the slave trade.

In other words, black American writers of literature are self-confident enough these days to be able to come at a well-worn subject in a different way -- even expressing criticism of something they might not have criticized before. In that sense, they are following in the wake of historians of the African American experience of the last quarter of the past century who paved the way for new perspectives.

In keeping with the adage that new experiences occasion new stories, black American writers of late have been writing about new venues and neighborhoods, new schools, friends and work situations. This may be part of the reason why they are reaching new audiences. As a result, Terry McMillan -- in books like *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998) -- can depict successful black women finding love in varied surroundings and gain a wide readership as well. Darryl Pinckney, in *High Cotton* (1992), can attract and amuse readers with his take on the corporate lunchroom. Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984), Trey Ellis' *Home Repairs* (1993) and *Right Here, Right Now* (1999) and Connie Porter's *All-Bright Court* (1991) represent the work of three young writers who, in symbolizing a middle-class milieu, incisively render relatively new black situations.

Equally fascinating is the rise of black American writers in the so-called sub-genres such as science fiction and crime thrillers. Octavia Butler -- in books such as *Kindred* (1988), mixing 20th-century black sensibilities with 19th-century history in a time warp -- has brought a new perspective to black American literature. Walter Mosley has advanced the status of the black American mystery story beyond the earlier work of George Schuyler, Chester Himes and Ishmael Reed by combining that form with the black migration narrative. With Easy Rawlins as his protagonist in books such as *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Mosley's novels are vivid because of the confrontation of black migrants from Texas and Louisiana with present-day Los Angeles, California. Striking within the mystery genre is the presence of several women writers. In books such as *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994), Barbara Neely deftly transforms a familiar black character in popular culture -- the maid -- into the savvy, observant sleuth

housekeepers often are or can be. Valerie Wilson Wesley's novels, including *Where Evil Sleeps* (1996), focus on Tamara Hayle, a private investigator who -- through her particular circumstances of being black and a single parent -- finds both insight and personal motivation. And Pamela Thomas-Graham, in *A Darker Shade of Crimson* (1998) and other novels, has brought the mystery novel, and a black heroine, into the hallowed campuses of Ivy League universities.

Black Americans traditionally have made significant contributions to poetry and drama, and they are doing so today as well. Rita Dove -- honored with a term as poet laureate of the United States in the early 1990s as well as a Pulitzer Prize -- certainly is one of the more exceptional poets of the current generation. Her latest collection, *On the Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999), her seventh, is a wide-ranging venture into family relationships, building upon the motif and affection that is at the heart of her earlier volume, *Mother Love* (1995). Dove has distinguished herself recently as a playwright, with *The Darker Face of the Earth*, her take on Sophocles' Oedipus, set on a Southern U.S. plantation during the 19th-century slave era. It is being staged at various venues across the United States. In collections such as *Thieves of Paradise* (1998) and his earlier *Neon Vernacular* (1993), among others, Yusef Komunyakaa, another Pulitzer Prize-winning black American poet, has distinguished himself through fierce takes on war and race, even as he is caught up in images of art and music, with a style that resonates with hints of blues and jazz. And Marilyn Nelson, whose poetry invariably has reached deep into memories of her own childhood as she focuses on interfamilial relationships and women's status in society, deals with freedom and status and black American heroism in a recent volume, *The Fields of Praise: New and Selected Poems* (1997).

In drama, the issue is frequently not just what is new and important but also what is accessible in written text form. Fortunately, publishers retain in print many of Langston Hughes' timeless dramas of years ago, and continue to publish the ongoing series of works by Pulitzer drama honoree August Wilson, a cycle of 20th-century dramas -- one set in, and reflecting, each decade -- that includes *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars* and *Fences*. These pieces

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overflow with memory and history, strong characters and intergenerational lessons. His latest work, *King Hedley II*, recently had its world premiere at a resident professional theater in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, even as his last piece, *Jitney*, is making its way to Broadway.

For the first time since the 1960s and 1970s, when works by James Baldwin, Charles Gordone, Joseph Walker, Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner and others found their way to the printed page, publishers are amenable to issuing play texts. As a result, besides Wilson, readers can turn to collections by Pearl Cleage (*Flying West and Other Plays*, 1999) and Suzan-Lori Parks (*The American Play and Other Works*, 1995) and the quite riveting performance art pieces by Anna Deavere Smith. Smith worked first in the aftermath of racial tensions in Brooklyn, New York, in 1991, and similar strife in Los Angeles, California, in 1992, to produce two pieces of documentary theater -- blending journalism, oral history and drama -- that she has taken to a number of theaters across the United States. She reproduced these one-person stagings in two volumes, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1993), and *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992: On the Road: A Search for American Character* (1994).

Some young playwrights, about whom favorable word of mouth is spreading, have yet to see their works on the printed page for mass audiences. One of the more gifted of these writers is Cheryl L. West, a onetime social worker, whose early piece centering on an AIDS patient, *Before It Hits Home*, was followed by *Jar the Floor*, a hearty, hilarious and yet heartbreaking piece about four generations of African American women gathering for the 90th birthday of the oldest of their number. West is decidedly in the tradition of Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson in her embracing of family and in the contemporaneity of her work.

No discussion of black American literature can ignore the literature of the public forum -- both the achievements of black writers in nonfiction and the rise of the black public intellectual and the books accompanying that ascent. The academy has played a role in this, since many intellectuals and authors have held academic positions and are in the forefront of developing courses in African American studies. Still, these individuals would not have such public

personae without the new venues now available in our generation -- in print journalism, electronic media and other outlets. The jazz expertise and social commentary of Stanley Crouch (*Always In Pursuit*, 1999), the complexities of feminism and love in the writings of bell hooks (*All About Love*, 2000), personal family histories such as the blended heritage of journalist James McBride (*The Color of Water*, 1996) and the erudition of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on diverse components of African American history and experience (*Colored People: A Memoir*, 1994; *Ten Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, 1998), all are components of black American literature as it flourishes today.

In assessing how black American literature has taken on the significance it currently boasts, we should note that it is prominent and pervasive because it has a full life of its own outside the academy. Toni Morrison clearly is not dependent on an academic audience. August Wilson no longer needs a drama school environment for initially mounting his plays. A raft of writers -- including Barbara Neely, Walter Mosley, Terry McMillan -- are highly popular while remaining outside the "canon" of black American literature. One factor is the proliferation of book clubs in the United States in the past decade; enrollment is as pervasive in African American communities as elsewhere, and African Americans tend to read the works of their fellow African Americans. To be sure, many book clubs are seeking out books that can be regarded as life-changing or inspiring, rather than works for the college course outlines.

Thanks to one particular book club, sponsored by television personality and actress Oprah Winfrey, debuting books by African American novelists Breena Clarke and Cleage received unprecedented publicity. In *River, Cross My Heart* (1999), a story centered on the politics and power of faith-based communities, Clarke, a young Washington, D.C., native, depicts the dynamics of her native city during the 1920s, in the throes of segregation. Dramatist Cleage's *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1998) is an offbeat, unexpectedly humorous look at some of life's crises and tragedies, dappled with its author's inherently pungent imagery. The same held true for *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a story about the impact of a family's transit from Haiti to the United States. This

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first novel by Edwidge Danticat -- a Haitian-American writer who, in a span of less than a half-decade, has become known by a wide readership as a luminous portrayer of the recent history of her native country -- also was a selection of Oprah's Book Club. This one, however, is destined to have a second life among students, for its critical and artistic value.

Indeed, in a tentative way, Danticat's writings are evidence that while black American literature now has a robust life beyond the academy, it also has a continually evolving place within it. Think here less of the courses in place, some since the 1960s, but rather of the certain conviction that black American literature is vital as a field of study for anyone seeking to know the literature of the United States. The number of graduate students including black American literature among their oral examination fields is rising; so, too, are the numbers of dissertations addressing black American authors -- particularly when combined, intriguingly, with writers representing various groupings. And the roster of universities in other countries granting higher

degrees for the study of black American literature is also on the ascent.

What of the future? Two issues readily appear. First, will black American literature continue to be mainstreamed? How will promising works continue to become the stuff of conversation in the marketplace? Second, how "national" will black American literature remain in a world that is increasingly more global in approach and transnational in outlook? In part, this will depend on how, or whether, the definition of black American writer will evolve. Will the writer be an inhabitant of the Americas as a whole, of the circum-Atlantic world, or just of the United States?

The issue may have been with us for some time, but this might be a propitious time to reframe and renew the debate. ■

*Robert B. Stepto is professor of African American studies, American studies and English at Yale University. He is the author of *Blue As The Lake: A Personal Geography* (1998, Beacon Press), and *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1991, University of Illinois Press).*



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## PROFILE:

JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN -- *HIS OWN MAN*

At a time when black American literature is thriving, when authors of long standing are lionized as they run familiar courses and new writers surface to be categorized into well-worn compartments, there -- *sui generis* -- is John Edgar Wideman.

It is difficult to itemize the disparate elements of his personal history without seeming to strain credibility. Consider: Born in Washington, D.C., in 1941, and raised in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), he is the son of a working-class family, a onetime basketball hero at the University of Pennsylvania, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University, holder of a degree in 18th-century literature, a novelist and memoirist with an endless string of enviable critical success and faithful readership, a married man and the father of a star player in the U.S. professional women's basketball league. He is an esteemed professor of English at the University of Massachusetts. Among other honors, he

won the PEN/Faulkner Award for his fifth novel, *Sent For You Yesterday* (1983), the only prize judged and funded by writers. Indeed, he has been called "the black William Faulkner," and "the softcover Shakespeare" -- a reference to the folio of paperback editions of his various titles.

And then there is the other side of the frame.

He is the author of *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), centering on the relationship between a successful man and his imprisoned sibling, convicted of murder and sentenced to life behind bars. It is not a novel. It is a family memoir. And he is the author, among other magazine articles, of a searing piece in *Esquire* some years ago about a father and a son who, having gone astray, killed a classmate. It, too, is nonfiction.

Two lives lived. It's the stuff of stories. But it's all true.

His personal traumas, one can imagine, have enriched his creative gifts. But the reader will not know anything more than the writer wants revealed, in books such as *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (1994). As he

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said in a *Washington Post* interview, "I'm not putting up my life as material to explain anything to anyone. I'll put it this way. It's a formulation. My life is a closed book. My fiction is an open book. They may seem like the same book -- but I know the difference."

Most likely, this writer -- because of his literary gifts -- would have been as profound, as impassioned and as insightful if none of the tragedies had befallen his family, no matter what subjects he might have explored. What his eyes have seen, what his ears have heard in the inner cities of Pittsburgh and elsewhere, including the music, have given his fiction a depth and a fragmented beauty that few of his peers can match.

In novels such as *Damballah* (1981), *Hiding Place* (1981) and *Sent For You Yesterday* -- familiarly known as *The Homewood Trilogy* -- he

penetrates, incisively, the Pittsburgh neighborhood of his youth as it was and as it is. *The Cattle Killing* (1996) is a period piece, centered on a yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. *Two Cities* (1999), his most recent novel, is set against a backdrop of present-day Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and constructed along musical lines -- blues, jazz, Motown, gospel, classical and funk.

Wideman has observed that he once yearned to write books that both his family in Pittsburgh and literary scholars could read and enjoy. The fact that his books have a wide following in the mass-market audience, and that a two-day international celebration of his work was slated for April 2000 at the University of Virginia, indicates that he may have achieved that seemingly elusive objective.

-- M.J.B.



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## OTHER BLACK AMERICAN WRITERS

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT** is an awarding-winning Haitian American writer. Born in Haiti in 1969, she lived there until the age of 12, then joined her parents in the United States, where she had difficulty fitting in with her peers. In her isolation she turned to writing about her native country, and about Haitians in America. This resulted in her highly acclaimed first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994, which she followed in 1995 with a collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!*, and with the novel *The Farming of Bones* in 1998. Garry Pierre-Pierre of *The New York Times* has heralded Danticat as "the voice of Haitian Americans."

**JAMAICA KINCAID** is acclaimed for her lyrical style. Doris Grumbach, writing in *The Washington Post Book World*, has said that Kincaid's style intensifies "the feelings of poetic jubilation Kincaid has...for all life." Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson (she changed her name in 1973) in Antigua, and left that

country at the age of 17 to work as a nanny in the United States. She began her literary career as a contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine. Her best known works -- which draw on her West Indian background -- include the novels *Annie John*; *Lucy*; and *The Autobiography of My Mother*; and the short story collection *At the Bottom of the River*.

**JAMES McBRIDE**, the son of a black minister and a white Jewish mother, has worked as a jazz saxophonist and as a journalist with *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe*. His much-praised 1996 memoir, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*, is an outgrowth of an essay about his mother that he wrote for the *Globe* in 1981. It combines an account of his own New York City childhood with his mother's life history. In a review of *The Color of Water* in *The Nation*, Marina Budhos writes that "McBride's memoir is not only a terrific story, it's a subtle contribution to the current debates on race and identity."

Novelist and short story writer **TERRY McMILLAN** has achieved a high-level of success since publication of her first novel, *Mama*, in 1987. McMillan, who was born in Michigan in 1951, is a storyteller whom one

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reviewer characterizes as writing with an "authentic, unpretentious voice" as she tells of the urban experience of African American men and women. Her novels also include *Disappearing Acts*, *Waiting To Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Deeply committed to networking other writers, and determined to correct what she considered the publishing industry's neglect of black writers, McMillan edited a collection, *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*, in 1990.

**WALTER MOSLEY** is best known for his groundbreaking series of tales about a fictional black detective struggling to get by in post-World War II California, but he has expanded his repertoire to include other types of fiction, as well as an examination of the American economic and political machine, *Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shaking Off the Dead Hand of History*, published in January 2000. Born in Los Angeles in 1952, Mosley achieved popular and critical success with his tales of black detective "Easy" Rawlins -- *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), *A Red Death* (1991), *White Butterfly* (1992), *Black Betty* (1994) and *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996). But his talents went beyond mere genre fiction: When Mosley published his first non-genre

novel, R.L.'s *Dream*, in 1996, the San Francisco Review of Books proclaimed it "a mesmerizing and redemptive tale of friendship, love, and forgiveness ... without doubt, the author's finest achievement to date."

**AUGUST WILSON**, born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1945, is one of the United States' most significant playwrights. In addition to other works, he has nearly completed a ten-play cycle chronicling the black experience in the United States, with each play set in a different decade of the 20th century. A number of the plays -- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *Jitney* and *King Hedley II* -- have won honors and awards, including four New York Drama Critics Circle Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes for Best Drama (*Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*). Known for powerful dialogue and emotionally-charged plots, Wilson has been described by *The New York Times* as "a major writer, combining a poet's ear for vernacular with a robust sense of humor (political and sexual), a sure instinct for cracking dramatic incident and passionate commitment to a great subject."

-- Kathleen Hug and Rosalie



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# HISPANIC AMERICAN LITERATURE: DIVERGENCE & COMMONALITY

BY VIRGIL SUAREZ



In an autobiographical sketch written in 1986, the respected Chicano American novelist Rudolfo Anaya observed that “if I am to be a writer, it is the ancestral voices of...[my]... people who will form a part of my quest, my search.”

Ancestral voices are very much a part of Hispanic American literature today, a tradition harking back more than three centuries that has witnessed a dramatic renaissance in the past generation. As the Hispanic experience in the United States continues to confront issues of identity, assimilation, cultural heritage and artistic expression, the works of Hispanic American writers are read with a great deal of interest and passion.

In a sense, the literature functions as a mirror, a reflection of the way Hispanic Americans are viewed by the mainstream culture -- but not always the majority. Readers and critics alike tend to celebrate this literature. It is rich, diverse, constantly growing, blending the history that infuses it with a impassioned feeling of contemporaneity.

In essence, the boom in the literature today is being forged in English, by people who live and work in the United States -- not in Spanish, as was the case with writers of generations and centuries past. This is a key difference, and a point of departure.

True, there are still some very real issues and problems facing Hispanic American writers in terms of finding outlets and venues for their work, as there are for other multicultural artists and, to be sure, writers in general. Although more work is being issued each year by major publishing houses, most of the interesting and engaging literature comes from small, independent presses that rely upon U.S. Government, private and university grants for stability. Literary journals and reviews always have been an outlet for Hispanic American voices, and

some of the best work is coming from such sources. Increasingly, though, with the recognition associated with the nation's most prestigious literary awards -- the Before Columbus Foundation Award, the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize -- Hispanic American authors are being courted by the publishing establishment.

Much of the attention of recent times, justifiably, is owed to the groundbreaking work of the Chicano Arts movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the emergence of Hispanic American poets such as Rodolfo Gonzales and Luis Alberto Urista (“Alurista,”) and other writers who chronicled the social and political history of the movement. The campaign was propelled by grassroots activists such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta who played key roles in the unionization of migrant workers achieved through *huelgas* (strikes and boycotts). As invariably has happened throughout history, paralleling political issues in one country or another, the plight of the migrant workers and their struggle for recognition were directly reflected in the arts. A prime example was the work of Luis Valdez and *Teatro Campesino*, his theater troupe, which played a pivotal role in creating solidarity and new social consciousness. During the strikes, *Teatro Campesino* performed from the back of flatbed trucks using striking migrant workers as performers -- theater for the people and by the people. One of his plays, *Zoot Suit*, went from rudimentary stagings to workshops to successful productions in Los Angeles and New York, eventually becoming a film.

In referring to Hispanic American literature, definitions are important. In this context, we are speaking about the literature written in English, and which mainly concerns itself with life in the United States. An early classic of this type is exemplified by



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the publication in 1959 of Jose Antonio Villareal's *Pocho*, a novel about a youth whose parents migrate to the United States from Mexico, in Depression-era America, to better their lives.

Hispanic American literature contains, within its tent, writings from different countries and cultures. Villareal represents one of the major Hispanic groups to contribute -- Mexican Americans. (A word of definition is in order. Mexican Americans are distinguished from Chicanos in that the former feel more of a national identity with Mexico; Chicanos, on the other hand, are more culturally allied with the United States and particularly with Native Americans.) To a great extent, their literary tradition owes a debt to the *corridos*, the popular ballads of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that recounted heroic exploits. These *corridos* were also precursors to Chicano poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, laying the foundation for a poetics that fuses the oral and the written, music and word. In the *corrido* we begin to see the mixing of the Spanish with the English, thus creating a new language with which to express a new reality.

Today, Chicano American writers have made an impression with such classic works as Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1985), Denise Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), Tomas Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1987), and the poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca, Loma Dee Cervantes and Leroy V. Quintana. They represent the heartbeat of the Chicano American community -- the living, breathing record of these people in the United States.

Puerto Ricans are the next largest contributors to the canon of Hispanic American literature with works such as Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* (1989), Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Ed Vega's *Casualty Report* (1991), and the poetry of Victor Hernandez Cruz, Miguel Algarin and Sandra Maria Estevez. They reflect the rhythms of their island that have been transported to New York City, San Francisco and other U.S. urban centers.

The next largest group to be represented are the Cuban Americans, making recent additions to bookshelves and college syllabi with works such as Roberto G. Fernandez' *Raining Backwards* (1988), Elias Miguel Munoz's *The Greatest Performance* (1991), Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992),

Oscar Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), along with the poetry of Gustavo Perez Firmat, Ricardo Pau-Llosa and Carolina Hospital. Their literary motivation, for the most part, is rooted in the reality of exile.

Students of Hispanic American literature and casual readers alike can gain fresh insights into the diversity of this literature through a number of anthologies. These collections gather both the established and emerging voices from among the main Hispanic American groups in the United States, as well as new voices emerging from the Dominican, Colombian and Guatemalan communities, currently represented by the work of Julia Alvarez, author of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and other novels, and books such as Jaime Manrique's *Twilight at the Equator* (1997), Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of the White Chickens* (1992), and Junot Diaz's *Drown* (1996). Each of these writers is bringing along a piece of a homeland that most likely is unfamiliar to the general readership.

**W**ith this impressive diversity of voices goes a caveat. Teachers, editors and readers more than ever have to be sensitive to issues of factionalism along national lines, which is only natural, since the grouping of these distinct and separate cultures under one term, Hispanic American, can seem forced. Yet one can argue that bringing all these cultures together under the one term may be comparable to the tension of sharing a meal with distant relatives -- there is a separate history and experience, yet there exists a bond of recognition, a family camaraderie.

The central point of unity among Hispanic American writers is language. While they may speak with different accents and use different expressions, they all share the experience of bilingualism. The ability to communicate in two languages, and more important, to think and feel in two languages, at times brings with it the phenomenon of being unable to express oneself fully in only one. Linguists term this "interference," and generally view it as a negative trait, or shortcoming. Still, Hispanic American writers and readers of Hispanic American literature assert that the intermingling of the two languages is an effective means of communicating what otherwise could not be expressed. Thus, many Hispanic

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American writers use Spanish in their work because it is an integral part of their experience.

Indeed, many Hispanic American authors believe that in the lives of their characters Spanish is not a “foreign” language, but rather a vital part of everyday speech and as such should not be emphasized with the use of italics. They emphasize the importance of Spanish by doing this. So many of the writers express themselves in English -- the language of the mainstream (whatever that may mean) -- but are resisting the destruction of their culture and thus preserve their identity by using Hispanic American expressions, points of reference and experiences. Hopefully this will become accepted not as “exotic,” but rather part of the redefined mainstream in the arts. Again, this is a clear distinction between Hispanic American literature and Latin American literature, which exists solely in Spanish and in translation in the United States, written by writers who do not live and work in this country.

A second facet that all Hispanic American cultures share is the need for cultural survival. This is a controversial issue among Hispanic Americans, especially writers of literature, since it deals with the question of assimilation. How much of their culture should Hispanic Americans be willing to lose or suppress in order to participate in mainstream society? The answers to this important question vary, yet it is an issue that all Hispanic American writers tackle either directly or in more subtle ways. There are worlds of difference, for instance, between a novel like *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*. *Bless Me, Ultima* has at its core a timeless bond with the earth and nature, and an aura reflecting a traditional spiritual heritage. Cisneros’ story cycle is more urban and pragmatic, and contemporary and assimilated in its stance on gender. But that’s the beauty of so many voices adding to the canon.

The differences, which can be significant, at times may not be obvious to a general readership in the United States and elsewhere. We have touched upon the rural peasant or *campesino* tradition, the strong ties to the land, with which the writings of Mexican Americans are interwoven. Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban Americans, being islanders, have strong ties to water,

reflected in the writings of the poets from those heritages, such as Firmat and Cofer. Urban life in the United States has given rise to a new tradition in Hispanic American literature, that of the *barrio*, the inner city. While for Mexican Americans the *barrio* is likely to be in California, the southwestern U.S. or Chicago, for the Puerto Rican the *barrio* is in New York City, evident chiefly in the work of Thomas and Vega. Cuban Americans are preoccupied with the dilemmas and frustrations of political exile. Their characters often feel a yearning and sense of loss for a homeland to which they cannot return. This is most obvious in nostalgic literature set in the idyllic Cuba of the past, as well as those speculating on the Cuba of the future, as in the novels of Roberto G. Fernandez and Cristina Garcia.

To a degree, the differences in religion enter the literature, from the Catholicism unique to various Latin American countries to the African *santeria* influence in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Chicana American novelist Ana Castillo, in *So Far From God* (1993), presents a Catholic perspective that does not lose sight of the indigenous Indian belief system. By the same token, Cuban American poets Adrian Castro and Sandra Castillo work *santeria* into their poetry.

As we have seen, the Hispanic American experience has many points of divergence from that of the mainstream, so it follows that the literature does too. However, there are common experiences that we all share as human beings, experiences that transcend cultures and find expression in art, making it universal and timeless. Coming of age, traditional family relationships, assimilation and the pursuit of the American dream are among the themes explored again and again. With the particular perspective Hispanic American writers bring to their work, it has a unique quality that, today, more and more, is finding an appreciative readership in the United States. ■

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*Virgil Suarez is a Cuban American novelist and professor of English at Florida State University in Tallahassee. He is the author of four novels, including Latin Jazz and Going Under, and edited Little Havana Blues, an anthology of Hispanic American literature. This article is an adaptation and expansion of an entry by Professor Suarez that appears in Encyclopedia of American Literature (Continuum Publishing Company, 1999).*



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## PROFILE:

JULIA ALVAREZ -- THE TWO WORLDS

In *Something To Declare*, her 1998 volume of personal essays following three novels and three collections of verse, Dominican American novelist Julia Alvarez quoted fellow writer of fiction Robert Stone's observation that "writing is how we take care of the human family."

To which she added, "it is through writing that I give myself to a much larger *familia* than my own blood."

The probings into relationships that have propelled Alvarez into the first rank of the current generation of Hispanic American writers are very much caught up with *la familia*, and an intriguing history it has been.

Alvarez, born in New York City in 1950 to Dominican parents, writes books whose scenes and sensibilities are very much linked to her own history. In her case, the links to the United States were deep: her uncles attended prestigious U.S. universities and her grandfather was a Dominican cultural attache posted to the United Nations. She and her three sisters grew up in the Dominican Republic at the family compound, surrounded by cousins and other relatives. But her father became involved in a plot against the island's dictator, Rafael Trujillo, and at 10, her existence was uprooted when, following a tip that an arrest was imminent, the family was compelled to leave the country for the United States on short notice. And so, her nomadic life began, taking her from home to boarding school to college, and on to poetry residences and university faculty appointments in a number of locales. She published her first poetry collection, *Homecomings*, in 1984.

During the second half of the decade, she began to write stories, 15 of which were joined together into three symmetrical sections to form a novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), told in reverse chronological order. A glimpse of a Dominican family not unlike her own that must adjust to U.S. life, it delineated what one critic called "its protagonists' precarious coming of age as Latinas in the United States and gringas in Santo Domingo." For Donna Rifkind, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, Alvarez had "beautifully captured the

threshold experience of the new immigrant, where the past is not yet a memory and the future remains an anxious dream."

The conflicted state in which the author found herself between two facets -- her American side and her Dominican heritage -- surfaced anew in her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), a darker novel with many more political overtones than her first, inspired by three sisters who were killed in 1960 for their underground activities against the Trujillo regime. Alvarez placed a thinly-veiled version of herself into the story as a writer who, seeking information, visits the family home of the women -- now a shrine run by a fourth sister who, by chance, escaped being killed. By inserting herself as *la gringa norteamericana* [the North American woman], critic Ilan Stavins noted in *The Nation*, she once again linked the old and the new.

*¡Yo!* (meaning "I"), revisiting the Garcia family of her first book, appeared in 1996, and is a much more rambunctious story, even as it hews to the central theme in Alvarez' work, the dual existence and conflicting experiences. Centering it on Yolanda, or Yo, the third sister, a published novelist who has turned her relatives into characters, Alvarez, cheekily, allowed the various family members and friends to offer their thoughts on Yo, from infancy to her new fame, while providing the author herself with the chance to consider the creative art and artist.

Alvarez, who has been on the English faculty at Middlebury College, in Vermont, since 1988, has always let readers into her heart and mind, but never more so than in her most recent nonfiction collection. She describes the circumstances of her emigration and the tensions surrounding it, family life in the United States and her maturation, the flowering of her writing career, the joys of teaching and the art of creating literature.

As a writer inhabiting two cultures, and aware that the spotlight is on multicultural writing these days more than ever, she explains, on behalf of her fellow Hispanic authors and, arguably, for writers of many backgrounds, that "we want our work to become part of the great body of all that has been thought and felt and written by writers of different cultures, languages, experiences, classes, races."

-- M.J.B.



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## OTHER HISPANIC AMERICAN WRITERS

**RUDOLFO ANAYA**, a native of New Mexico, where he was born in 1937, is considered one of the premier Chicano American writers. He is best known for a trilogy of novels published during the 1970s -- *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), which won the prestigious Premio Quinto Sol national Chicano literary award; *Heart of Aztlán* (1976); and *Tortuga* (1979). All three works focus on growing up as a Hispanic American in U.S. society. Many of Anaya's works are about faith and the loss of faith. His writing is rich in symbolism, poetry, and spiritualism as he explores the mystery of life and his cultural heritage. His novels include *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984); *Lord of the Dawn* (1987); and *Albuquerque* (1992), for which he received the PEN-West Fiction Award; *Zia Sammer and Jalamanta* (1995); and *Rio Grande Fall* (1996). His most current work is *My Land Sings: Stories from the Rio Grande* (1999). In addition to his novels and short stories, Anaya has written plays, poems, children's books and works of nonfiction. He is currently a professor of English at the University of New Mexico.

**ANA (HERNANDEZ DEL) CASTILLO**, a highly-respected Chicana poet, novelist, and essayist, has been called one of the most original voices in Chicana and contemporary American feminist literature. Her work often considers how gender and sexuality intersect with racism and cultural conflict. Her first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), an American Book Award winner, explores the changing role of Hispanic women in the United States and Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s. *So Far From God* (1993), her most popular novel, focus on the complex lives and relationships of Latino women. Castillo's poetry collections, *Women Are Not Roses* (1984), and *My Father Was a Toltec* (1988), explore the lives and gender roles of Latinas in the Hispanic community. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1994), examines the situation of women of color in the United States. Over the years, Castillo has broadened her work to include musical performance.

Mexican American writer of fiction **SANDRA CISNEROS** ignited a cultural controversy in 1997 when she painted her historic San Antonio, Texas, house neon purple in violation of the city's historic preservation code -- claiming the bright color as a key part of her Mexican heritage. The incident mirrors her most well-known work and National Book Award winner, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), in which she writes, "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from." Cisneros, born in Chicago in 1954, draws heavily upon her childhood experiences and ethnic heritage in her writing -- addressing poverty, cultural suppression, self-identity and gender roles in her fiction and poetry. Although she is noted primarily for *Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), her poetry, which includes *Bad Boys* (1980), *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), and *Loose Woman* (1994) has also received considerable attention.

**CRISTINA GARCIA** was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1958 and fled the Castro regime to New York City with her family when she was two. In 1990 she left her job as a reporter and correspondent for *Time* magazine to explore the issues of her Cuban heritage and her childhood in fiction. She has written two critically acclaimed books chronicling what it means to be Cuban American. The first, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), focuses on three generations of maternally-related Cuban women, each living her life differently as a result of the Cuban revolution. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "evocative and lush...a rich and haunting narrative." Her second, *The Aguero Sisters* (1997), glimpses two middle-aged siblings -- one an electrician in Havana, the other a salesperson in New York City. It, too, received glowing reviews and won her a new and increasingly devoted readership. As one critic has noted, Garcia "has opened a portal to Cuba -- where readers enter a world of history, culture, love, yearning, and loss."

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Award-winning novelist **OSCAR HIJUELOS**, born in 1951 in New York City, calls upon his Cuban American heritage in writing fictional works that have won him both critical and popular acclaim. His first novel, *Our House in the Last World* (1983), tells of a Cuban American family's difficulties adjusting to life in the United States during 1940s. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), moved him to the first rank of American novelists in portraying two brothers who leave their native Cuba and to seek their fortunes as singers in New York City in the early 1950s, at the outset of the television era, as the Latino musical craze erupts.

Hijuelos' 1993 novel, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, takes a different tack, focusing on the female members of a



Cuban-Irish family living in Pennsylvania. The author's heritage was only a minor theme in *Mr. Ives' Christmas* (1995), a tender tale of a foundling, that was greeted by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as "a life-affirming novel, a worthy successor to Dickens." However, his most recent story, *Empress of the Splendid Season* (1999) returns to those roots as it tells the story of a humble Cuban American from the late 1940s to the present. Hijuelos is most noted for the skilled contrasts he draws between Cuban and American life, his rich descriptions of everyday existence in Cuba, and his capacity for incorporating elements of magical realism into his novels.

-- S.D.

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# NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE: REMEMBRANCE, RENEWAL

BY GEARY HOBSON



In 1969, the fiction committee for the prestigious Pulitzer Prizes in literature awarded its annual honor to N. Scott Momaday, a young professor of English at Stanford University in California, for a book entitled *House Made of Dawn*.

The fact that Momaday's novel dealt almost entirely with Native Americans did not escape the attention of the news media or of readers and scholars of contemporary literature. Neither did the author's Kiowa Indian background. As news articles pointed out, not since Oliver LaFarge received the same honor for *Laughing Boy*, exactly 40 years earlier, had a so-called "Indian" novel been so honored. But whereas LaFarge was a white man writing about Indians, Momaday was an Indian — the first Native American Pulitzer laureate.

That same year, 1969, another young writer, a Sioux attorney named Vine Deloria, Jr., published *Custer Died For Your Sins*, subtitled "an Indian Manifesto." It examined, incisively, U.S. attitudes at the time towards Native American matters, and appeared almost simultaneously with *The American Indian Speaks*, an anthology of writings by various promising young American Indians — among them Simon J. Ortiz, James Welch, Phil George, Janet Campbell and Grey Cohoe, all of whom had been only fitfully published at that point.

These developments that spurred renewed -- or new -- interest in contemporary Native American writing were accompanied by the appearance around that time of two works of general scholarship on the subject, Peter Farb's *Man's Rise to Civilization*

(1968) and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* (1970). Each struck a responsive chord in U.S. popular taste, and statistics show that even today, some 30 years later, their popularity has not abated.

Steadily, other volumes, and other writers, surfaced. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Welch's *A Winter in the Blood*, Gerald Vizenor's postmodern fictions, and the poetry of Paula Gunn Allen, Simon J. Ortiz and Linda Hogan have led in turn, over the years, to newer writers like novelists Sherman Alexie, Greg Sarris and Thomas King, and poets Kimberly Blaeser, Janice Gould and Janet McAdams.

In 1992, a group of Native American scholars and activists created an international writers' festival, bringing together 360 artists from nine countries, chiefly the United States. Nearly half their number already had published at least one volume -- fiction, drama, memoirs, even cookbooks. Out of that convocation came two organizations -- the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas, and a mentoring group, Wordcraft Circle, bringing established Native American writers together with apprentice talents.

Each year since 1992, the Native Writers' Circle has presented awards for "first books" in poetry and fiction. For anyone wondering about the future of Native American writing, these prize-winning volumes offer an ample, positive response. Look, for example, to a young artist like Chippewa poet Blaeser -- whose evocative debut collection of verse, *Trailing You* (1995), was followed by a well-regarded piece of scholarship, a study of the complex, even

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puzzling prose of fellow Native American writer, postmodernist satirist Gerald Vizenor.

Indeed, the expansion of creativity and interest in Native American literature is much more than a "boom." It represents, collectively, a renaissance. More than a generation after it began, it is a part of American literature as a renewal, a continuance. It is remembering.

One can best illustrate the phenomenon of renaissance through a classroom experience going back many years. My students had been reading copies of poems by Mohawk Indians from the upper sector of New York State, and the subject turned to the various Native American writers in other parts of the country. One student, probably reflecting the thinking of many in the room, marveled, "Isn't it amazing how Native American literature has just burst so suddenly upon the scene?"

The question was stunning at the time -- and remains so in my memory. For Native American literature did not merely "spring up." Like the life and culture of which it is a part, it is centuries old. Its roots are deep in the land -- too deep for a mere five centuries of influence by other civilizations to upturn in any lasting, complete and irrevocable way.

Remembering, continuance, renewal. Native Americans have been accustomed to recounting their histories and their ways of life through intricate time-proven processes of storytelling. It is only during recent decades that scholars have identified these ways of storytelling as "oral tradition." For millennia, Native Americans carried on their traditions in that fashion. Never more than a generation from extinction, as Momaday has written, it is all the more to be cherished by the people because of that tenuous link. In remembering, there has been strength and continuance and renewal throughout the generations.

In the words of Acoma Pueblo poet Simon J. Ortiz, "Indians are everywhere." From Refugio Savala of Sonora, Mexico, to Mary Tall Mountain of the Alaska Koyukon tribe; from the Navajo country of Geraldine Keams and Larry Emerson to the northeastern Maine of Joseph Bruchac, Native Americans are writing

about themselves and their people. Their writings are based on firm ground, nurtured by strong roots, and are growing indomitable flowers.

It is interesting to note that even in written form, in English, Native American literature is quite venerable within the framework of U.S. literature itself, going back to the early 19th century, when early writers -- among them William Apess of the Pequot tribe, George Copway (Ojibway) and Chief Elias Johnson (Tuscarora) -- published books relating to their tribal cultures. There is evidence, too, that many tribes had variants of written language long before Sequoyah made his Cherokee nation literate virtually overnight. Even if the books of the Delaware Indians and Iroquois Confederacy were handed down orally for many generations, at an early date they were reproduced in various written ways. Ironically, even when U.S. writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow presented the American Indian from their perspectives, Native Americans were writing their own books and in the process, developing a literature.

If, in early periods, Native American writing consisted of storytelling -- or, as we would term it, fiction -- a sea change took place in the second half of the 19th century, chiefly with the development of the Indian reservations system in the 1870s and 1880s. Autobiography and biography became the most popular form, and continued to dominate well into the 20th century.

These memoirs were often written by others -- anthropologists or poets recording and editing the life stories of Native Americans who were standing at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries. Perhaps the most famous of these is John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). According to Neihardt, Black Elk told his story to his son in the Oglala Lakota language. The son then translated it into English for Neihardt, who then rewrote it. This was a common practice, with many examples in the middle years of the past century, ranging among the tribes, from Crows and Cheyenne of the northern tier of the United States to the Apaches and Navajos in the Southwest.

Of course, not every personal account was "told to" someone else. Some individual authors appeared, among them Charles A. Eastman, a Santee Sioux and university-trained medical doctor who wrote such

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books as *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and *The Soul of the Indian* (1911) -- and Chief Luther Standing Bear, author of *My People The Sioux* (1928) and *Land of the Spotted Eagle*. (1933) Momaday's 1975 volume, *The Names*, was part of this tradition.

As the 20th century progressed, Native American literature broadened beyond memoir and biography into fiction, journalism and even playwriting. D'Arcy McNickle was the best writer of fiction of the period from the 1930s to 1970s, with books such as *The Surrounded* (1936) and *Runner in the Sun* (1954). He was also extremely active as a proponent of Indian Affairs. Will Rogers, the beloved U.S. newspaper columnist turned humorist whose heyday was the 1920s and 1930s, was a Cherokee Indian, as was playwright Lynn Riggs, whose most famous drama, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), was transformed into the classic Broadway musical of the 1940s, *Oklahoma!*

In the early decades of the century's second half, chiefly from the 1960s on, Native American literature's blossoming was indebted to a variety of periodicals — more established publications such as the *South Dakota Review* and *Cimarron Review*, and several smaller presses and magazines and publishing houses, among them *Sun Tracks*, *Blue Cloud Quarterly* and *Strawberry Press*. The poems of Hogan, Joy Harjo, William Oandasan and many others first appeared in these and other journals.

Many Native American writers and scholars first made their marks writing about non-Indian subjects. Momaday's first venture was a collection of the works of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, a lesser-known poet of the Emersonian circle in mid-19th-century Massachusetts. Louis Owens, who has expansively reconsidered and affirmed his Choctaw-Cherokee heritage in his later writings, started out with scholarship on the works of John Steinbeck. (As an aside, I began my career in education, poetry and writing as a specialist in Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville.)

Who are Native American writers? This question has preoccupied me for years, even before I compiled my 1979 anthology, *The Remembered Earth*. For

that volume, I decided to maintain as broad a spectrum of definition as possible. For instance, I included Dana Naone, a young and gifted native-born Hawaiian writer, because we "mainland" Native Americans are becoming increasingly aware that while Hawaiians are not, properly speaking, American Indians, they are, nonetheless, Native Americans, in a real sense. Unsurprisingly, Naone's verse contains themes and concerns similar to those of Allen and Silko.

Anthropologists and historians have postulated that inclusion as Native Americans depends on three essential criteria: genetic, cultural and social. The genetic distinction is "full-blood," "half-blood," "one-fourths" and so on. Culturally, a person is characterized in terms of where he or she emanates, and their distinctive ways of life, religion and language. Socially, someone is adjudged to be Native American because of how he or she views the world, land, home, family and other aspects of life.

**B**ut as the years progress, identity has become less of a motivating factor among literary themes than sovereignty, and as part of it, reclaiming the past. Native Americans are concerned about who they are as a people, and write from the community's perspective — whether the setting is urban or rural — and that sense of community reaffirms and bolsters sovereignty.

Novelists Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie and poets Linda Hogan and Ray Young Bear are examples of writers who, truly, are doing what Charles Dickens did in London more than a century ago. That is, they are creating a sense of place. Literature, invariably, emerges from that, and even though the best writers strive to be universal, it is the sense of place with which they are deeply imbued. Erdrich, a poet and writer of fiction, is best known for her Native American tetralogy -- *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). She recently brought her Ojibwa roots to the foreground in *The Antelope Wife* (1999), a portrait of two contemporary urban Native American families against a tapestry of 100 years of history. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan's verse — bonded to south central Oklahoma — has focused on the landscape and on history. More recently, though, as she has grown and developed, she has dealt with such issues as animal preservation and feminism.



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Alexie, one of the finer young writers who blends realism and sardonic humor with a strong lyricism in writing fiction, poetry and screenplays, is most noted for *Indian Killer* (1996), a dark novel about the search for a serial killer against a contemporary urban setting. Greg Sarris, a native-born Californian writer of Miwok and Pomo extraction, found a wide readership for his first volume, *Grand Avenue* (1994), a collection of short stories set within his native multicultural neighborhood in urban Santa Rosa, California -- populated by generations of Pomo Indians as well as Portuguese, Mexican and African Americans. His first novel, *Watermelon Nights* (1998), is an urgent glimpse of tradition, crisis and renewal within a Native American family. Lately, he has moved into playwriting as well.

In the final analysis, though, the most important concern is not whether one is more or less Indian than his or her fellow American Indian. It is much more imperative that both recognize their common heritage, and strive together for the betterment of Native Americans as an entity. After all, in the end, the writing we leave behind us will be there for the people who come after us. And yet, it is the individual writer's duty to comment on things he or she feels to be important, regardless of whether the subject of the writing deals exclusively with Native American concerns. If we didn't have Momaday's writings on Russia, Aaron Carr's short poems about outer space or Russell Bates' science fiction tales and television scripts, Native American literature would be poorer for their absence.

(As Indians write about subjects other than their community, a wealth of non-native authors -- before and after Oliver LaFarge's *Laughing Boy* -- have probed Native American life, some quite successfully. More than a half-century ago, Frank Waters fashioned what may be the finest such novel, *The Man Who Killed The Deer* (1942), a study of cultural conflicts among the Taos Indians of

northern New Mexico. These days, in writing his series of best-selling novels centered on Navajo tribal police, Tony Hillerman has taken pains to learn the culture and lore as he creates his stories.)

Ultimately, then, Native American writers are those of Native American blood and background who affirm their heritage in individual ways -- as do writers of any culture. Some write of reservation life, others depict urban surroundings. Some delve into history, others are fiercely contemporary. Joseph Bruchac, who has had an enormous influence on a generation of younger writers as a mentor and enabler, is noted today as a writer of children's stories, such as *Between Earth and Sky* (1996) and *The Arrow Over the Door* (1998), presenting tribal legends in a modern context for new audiences.

"Literature is a facet of a culture," Paula Gunn Allen writes, and as such, gives something of value back to the people of which she is a part.

Heritage is people. People are the earth. Earth is heritage. In remembering these relationships -- to the people, the past, the land -- we renew in strength our continuance as a people. Literature, in all its forms, is our most durable way of carrying on this continuance. By making literature, like the singers and storytellers of earlier times, we serve the people as well as ourselves in an abiding sense of remembrance.

We must never forget these relationships. Our land is our strength, and our people the land -- one and the same -- as it always has been and always will be.

Remembering is all. ■

*Geary Hobson, a poet and essayist of Cherokee-Quapaw heritage, is a member of the faculty of the Department of English at the University of Oklahoma. This article is an expansion of Professor Hobson's introduction to an anthology, The Remembered Earth, originally published by Red Earth Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1979, and reprinted by the University of New Mexico Press, 1981. It has been used by permission of the author.*



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## PROFILE:

LINDA HOGAN -- WATCHING OVER THE WORLD

"I have considered my writing to come from close observation of the life around me," Native American poet Linda Hogan suggests, "a spoken connection with the earth and with the histories of the earth."

There is rarely a discussion of Native American writing -- never an anthology -- that does not include the expansive, and forceful creativity of this writer of Chickasaw descent whose life has been totally encompassed by the goings and comings of the natural elements of her native Colorado, where she was born in 1947, and its surrounding regions and denizens, both human and animal.

"More and more I find that my writing comes from a sense of traditional indigenous relationship with the land and its peoples, from the animals and plants of tribal histories, stories and knowledge," she has said. "I am trying to speak this connection, stating its spirit, adding to it the old stories that have come to a new language."

Writing gracefully in free verse (a 1985 poetry collection, *Seeing Through the Sun*, won the American Book Award), she has also written fiction of note, focusing on the clash between nature and contemporaneity, in novels such as *Mean Spirit* (1990) -- which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize -- and two subsequent books, *Storms* (1995) and *Power* (1998). She has also written a lilting volume of nonfiction, *Dwellings* (1995), a study of the idea of what constitutes home, be it a residence or the earth itself. For her, once more, it was about "a coming together of traditional systems, of ways of seeing the world, of years thinking about where our systems of belief have led us," she said at the time of its publication.

"Writing is how I process life," she told an interviewer in 1994. "It gives you access to a part of yourself you can't usually get to. Writing shows me what's going on inside." But, she added, she tries not to be too esoteric. "I want

my work to be accessible, but I want it to have layers beneath the story. I want people to feel it."

Hogan is the child of working-class parents. Her father, a carpenter, is descended from Indians who traveled from Mississippi to Oklahoma in the 1830s as part of a torturous journey known as the Trail of Tears, and her mother is white, or, as Hogan wryly terms it, "pink." Shy as a child, young Linda left home at 17 to begin what was to be a peripatetic lifestyle, working first as a teacher's aide with handicapped children, then in a nursing home, then as a clerk. She enrolled in the University of Colorado at 26, continuing her education at the University of Maryland, where she began writing in earnest. Eventually, her writing enabled her to learn more about her heritage, as she elicited stories from relatives and friends. Her first collection, *Calling Myself Home*, was published in 1978.

Over time, she has worked as a teacher, as a specialist in wildlife rehabilitation, and in various capacities with her own tribe and others. She hasn't worked in a classroom in years, though, and misses it sorely. "There was such satisfaction," she reflected in a recent conversation. "When someone would learn a word, or when somebody's writing would take off through the use of words, it's the happiest thing -- incredible! There's nothing better for a teacher than to see a student 'get it,' to be able to expand."

She is spending most of her time these days working with her own tribe, commuting regularly from her Colorado home to the tribal land in Oklahoma, taking on the editorship of its quarterly magazine, *The Journal of Chickasaw History*. She has just completed her latest book, a family memoir she has titled *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*.

Writing this personal history is not distracting her from her fundamental goal.

"I love the earth and everything on it," she says firmly. "And everywhere I can, I am trying to have that feeling reinforced by writing about it."

— M.J.B.



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## OTHER NATIVE AMERICAN WRITERS

*“One of the better new novelists, Indian or otherwise,” is Time magazine’s description of **SHERMAN ALEXIE**. His work as a novelist, poet and screenwriter is distinguished by the blending of magic realism and sardonic humor with a lyrical gift. Born in 1966, he draws heavily upon his life as a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene, raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. One of his earliest works, a short story collection entitled The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993), was greeted by The New York Times Book Review as “spare, disturbing stories [that] trace with stark, lyric power the experience of American Indians in the modern world.” He adapted one of the stories into a film, Smoke Signals (1998), an award-winning movie that was the first commercial feature film written, directed and acted by Native Americans. His most popular book, Indian Killer (1996), actually is a departure from his usual atmosphere -- a dark portrait of a serial killer and the racial tension he incites*

**JOY HARJO**, born in 1951, is of Muskogee Creek heritage. She is at the forefront of a group of Native American writers and artists who have gained national and international prominence over the past two decades. She is a screenwriter, teacher, and musician -- but she is most widely acclaimed for her poetry, which has earned her many prestigious awards. Her first full-length volume of poetry, What Moon Drove Me to This (1980), demonstrated her ability to voice the deep spiritual truths behind everyday experiences. Known for her outspokenness on political and feminist themes, she is also a poet of myth and the subconscious whose imagery is as beholden to the hidden mind as to her native southwestern United States. In addition to her writing, Harjo has endeavored to popularize the work of other Native American Women writers.

The poetry and prose of **N. SCOTT MOMADAY** reflect his Kiowa Indian heritage. He has said that his verse, in particular, grows from and sustains the Indian oral tradition. When Momaday’s first novel, House Made of Dawn (1968), received the 1969 Pulitzer prize for fiction, it was the first major recognition of a work of Native American literature and a landmark for those seeking to understand “Indian identity.” The themes of the healing force of nature and of the Indian caught between two worlds appear in that book and also in his second novel, The Ancient Child (1989), whose main character, a Kiowa artist living in San Francisco, seeks to discover his lost Indian identity. In The Names: A Memoir (1976), Momaday explores his heritage through tribal tales and boyhood memories. In addition to his fiction, Momaday is also an accomplished poet and painter. In The Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961-1991 (1992) brings together numerous poems from his early years along with newer poems and stories, and 60 drawings by the author. Momaday explains much of his perspective as a writer and as a Native American in Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday (1989).

A noted poet and writer with an international following, **SIMON J. ORTIZ** has his heritage among the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, where he was born and primarily raised. While his upbringing offered him a strong sense of his roots, it also offered him the opportunity to experience alienation and isolation from mainstream American culture, and led to an awareness of the need to “know the system” to be able to fight back. One of his best-known works is Fight Back: For the People, for the Land (1980). His use of stark, lucid language very much indebted to the Indian oral tradition reflects the struggles, sufferings and triumphs of his people. His many collections of poetry include Going for the Rain (1976); A Good Journey (1977); From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which is Our America (1981), Woven Stone (1992) and After and Before the Lightning (1994). In addition to poetry and prose, Ortiz has written stories for children and other works for Native American cultural enrichment.. His short stories are collected in Howbah Indians (1978) and Fightin’ (1983).

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**GREG SARRIS**, whose heritage is a blend of American Indian, Filipino and Jewish roots, was born in 1952, grew up in poverty in Santa Rosa, California, and was raised in foster homes. He learned only later in life that his father -- whom he never knew -- was Native American, part Coast Miwok, part Pomo. Ultimately, he went to live with his father's people, where he experienced the difficulty of living between two worlds. Today, besides being a writer of fiction and a professor of English at the University of California at Los Angeles, he is the elected chairman, or chief, of the Federated Coast Miwok Tribe. His first work of fiction, *Grand Avenue* (1994), is an interweaving of the lives of nine people in a multiethnic neighborhood in Santa Rosa, California. It allowed him, for the first time, to incorporate his personal experience and observations in his writings, to show the pain and the hope that Native Americans experience as a culture. His most recent novel, *Watermelon Nights* (1998), is a series of three novellas about the love and forgiveness that keep a modern American Indian family together - told from the perspectives of a 20-year-old Pomo Indian, his mother and his grandmother.

**LESLIE MARMON SILKO** is the author of, among other books, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), a sprawling five-century saga about the struggles between Native Americans and Europeans. Born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, she was raised on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in that state. Her first book of poems, *Laguna Woman* (1974), soon brought her attention, and she was becoming known for her talent in short fiction when her first novel, *Ceremony* (1977), the story of Pueblo veterans of World War II, was published. Her second major novel, *Storyteller* (1981), recreate stories about her own family based on native lore. It took her a decade thereafter to complete *Almanac of the Dead*. Her latest novel, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), set around 1900, describes a clash of cultures as seen through a young girl caught between her Indian heritage and the aristocratic Victorian society in which she finds herself, through circumstances.

-- S.D.



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MULTICULTURAL

# VOICES

“Far from being an indicator of the demise of western civilization, multicultural literature is the affirmation of the most fundamental principle of a democracy: to give all people an equal voice...Each voice is valid and valuable. And the more open we are to listening to these diverse voices, the more enriched and enlarged our own lives will be.”

*Amy Ling, Chinese American scholar-author (deceased)*

“As a writer, I’ve tried to consider most importantly my life as a Native American who is absolutely related to the land and all that that means culturally, politically, personally. Nothing is separate from me in that sense, and I am included with the earth and its aspects and details.”

*Simon J. Ortiz, Native American poet of Acoma Pueblo heritage*

“As a writer, you carry the world inside you. I carry a map of Kerala in my heart. I walk by Central Park [in New York City], see the trees and find inspiration for a story or poem set in Kerala.”

*Meena Alexander, Indian American poet, essayist and novelist*

“Literature is part of culture, culture is that meeting-place. We must care where people come from in order to respect the fact that they have origins, they have parents and grandparents, they have music, dancing, poetry. There is great pleasure in diversity.”

*D.H. Melhem, Lebanese American poet*

“If you look at all my work, ...that commonality, this thread that runs through them all is this need to understand where you came from in order to understand what you must do or how you can move from the present to any future...”

*August Wilson, black American playwright*

“Even when I’m praised, so much of the time what they say over and over is, ‘Oh, it’s so American!’ as though that needs to be said. I still have to contend with, do I speak English? I could never have written the title story in *Who’s Irish?*...until I was firmly established as a writer of English. It’s an ongoing problem for Asian Americans, but I also have to say that it’s interesting to me, because that’s where the inner self bumps up against society. We’re all constructs, we’re all compromises between what we’ve experienced and how we’re perceived.”

*Gish Jen, Chinese American novelist*

“My mission, if you will, is to get Americans to realize that we have to work together to second-by-second redefine what American culture is and what the total heritage is. I can be just as much an American writer writing the kind of material that I do as a [Don] DeLillo writing his last novel about baseball. There are many Americans, and it’s sensitizing people to accept us as part of the fabric and not just simply adumbrations.”

*Bharati Mukherjee, Indian American novelist*

“When one is telling a story and one is using words to tell the story, each word that one is speaking has a story of its own, too. Often the speakers, or tellers, will go into these word stories, creating an elaborate

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structure of stories within stories. This structure, which becomes very apparent in the actual telling of a story, informs contemporary Pueblo writing and storytelling as well as the traditional narratives. This perspective on narrative -- of story within story, the idea that one story is only the beginning of many stories and the sense that stories never truly end -- represents an important contribution of Native American cultures to the English language."

*Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo (Native American) writer of fiction and poetry*

"Language is a combat between individuals, a combat with the self. Language betrays us. It doesn't always do what we want it to do. I love that disarray. It's where we're human."

*Anna Deavere Smith, black American playwright*

"My poems and stories often begin with the voices of our neighbors, mostly Mexican American, always inventive and surprising. I never get tired of mixtures."

*Naomi Shihab Nye, Arab American poet of Palestinian extraction*

"My influences are sometimes the language of ceremony and transformation, sometimes science. I research my work and think of how to translate a different world view, a different way to live with this world. I try to keep up on contemporary poetry, not only American, but in translation and from other countries as well."

*Linda Hogan, Native American poet of Chickasaw heritage*

"For me, multicultural literature is a source of vitality for American culture, and for the English language. There always have been marginal forces that have broadened the mainstream, throughout the history of American literature. They develop, and flourish and enrich the literature and the language. Diversity is always a good thing. It's the source of life, and the richness and abundance of a culture."

*Ha Jin, Chinese American novelist, National Book Award winner, 1999*

"All literature, and certainly Chicano literature, reflects, in its more formal aspects, the mythos of the people, and the writings speak to the underlying philosophical assumptions which form the particular world view of culture... In a real sense, the mythologies of the Americas are the only mythologies of all of us, whether we are newly arrived or whether we have been here for centuries."

*Rudolfo Anaya, Hispanic American novelist*

"The mainstream of American literature is being redefined. It's no longer a literature of 'the other,' or the margins. It is reflecting more and more who we are as Americans. People writing in this new tradition are quite privileged, I think, in that they are at interesting borders and crossroads of culture. They're a part of it, and also slightly outside of it. It's a unique position, perspective and time. Also, the borders are where a lot of interesting literature is happening, where cultures are rubbing up against one another, where different languages are struggling to accommodate one another. And English is changing because of this."

*Cristina Garcia, Cuban American novelist*

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## Internet Sites

*Electronic Archives for Teaching the American Literatures (Georgetown University)*

<http://www.georgetown.edu/tamlit/tamlit-home.html>

The Electronic Archives, designed as a complementary resource to the electronic discussion list, T-AMLIT, contain essays, syllabi, bibliographies and other resources for teaching the multiple literatures of the United States. The Archives are created and maintained by the Center for Electronic Projects in American Culture Studies (CEPACS) at Georgetown University's American Studies Program, and are sponsored by Georgetown University and the D.C. Heath Publishing Company.

*Literary Resources -- Ethnicities and Nationalities*

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/ethnic.html>

Prepared by Jack Lynch, an English professor at Rutgers University, this page links to sites that address race, ethnicity or national identity. Links to specific authors appear on his American literature page:

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/american.html>

*MELUS: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*

<http://duchess.lib.csufresno.edu/SubjectResources/Multicultural/MELUS/>

MELUS publications, journal, activities and announcements can be found on this page as well as a link to the listserv, MELUS-L. See especially Ethnic Literature Resources on the Web from the Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno.  
<http://duchess.lib.csufresno.edu/SubjectResources/Multicultural/MELUS/LiteraryResources.html>

*Modern Language Association of America (MLA)*

<http://www.mla.org/>

For over 100 years, members of the MLA have worked to strengthen the study and teaching of language and literature. The organization hosts an annual convention and other meetings, works with related organizations, and sustains a publishing program in the humanities.

*National Endowment for the Humanities*

<http://www.neh.gov/>

This independent U.S. Government agency, created in 1965, is the largest funder of humanities programs in the United States. Its mission is "to enrich American cultural life by promoting knowledge of human history, thought and culture throughout the

nation." The Endowment provides grants for high-quality humanities projects in four funding areas: preserving and providing access to cultural resources, education, research and public programs.

*Voice of the Shuttle -- English Literature -- Minority Literature*

<http://vos.ucsb.edu/shuttle/eng-min.html>

Based at the University of California Santa Barbara, this site provides a structured and briefly annotated guide to online resources in the humanities.

*Voices from the Gaps: Women Writers of Color*

<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/index.html>

A project from the University of Minnesota that focuses on the lives and works of women writers of color in North America. Designed primarily to serve as an active learning component in the literature classroom, the site relies upon students and scholars from around the world to contribute author "home pages" for women writers of color. Each author page presents biographical, critical and bibliographical information about the writer, images and quotes pertinent to her life and works, and links to other Internet resources which contain significant information about that writer. The pick "Meet the writers by racial/ethnic background" offers pick for African American, Asian American, Chicana/Latina, Indian/Middle Eastern/Arabic, and Indigenous/Native American writers. In addition to the author pages, which comprise the heart of this website, there is a list of sites related to the study of women writers of color.

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*Al Jadid*

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This "Review and Record of Arab Culture and the Arts" offers digests and reviews of new Arabic titles in the English language; it also publishes and translates texts from Arabic writers and scholars. Book reviews and interviews with intellectuals such as Edward Said, Youssef Chahine and Etel Adnan are also included.

*Discovering Arabic Fiction*

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/3439/arabfiction.html>

An annotated bibliography of notable fiction by Arab and Arab American writers.

*The Media Oasis: Journalism, Arab American Issues, Politics and Free Thought*

<http://www.hanania.com/>

Ray Hanania, a noted Chicago-based writer and journalist, includes information on Arab American literature, culture, and politics on this site. He also provides links to Arab American organizations.

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*Asian American Studies Resource Guide*

<http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/ethnicstudies/asian/>

From the Ethnic Studies Project at the University of Southern California, this site contains resources on Asian American literature, literary criticism, and general reference materials. Links to specialized collections at universities and other organizations are also included.

*Asian American Writer's Workshop*

<http://www.panix.com/~aaww/>

This community-based art organization is dedicated to the development, creation, publication and dissemination of Asian American Literature. Its four divisions, Programs, Publications, Arts-in-Education, and Booksellers, are represented on the Web page, which also contains information on programs, upcoming events and membership.

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SCRAAL: *Seattle Contemporary Review of Asian American Literature*

<http://www.scraal.com>

Updated every weekday, this online journal provides book reviews and interviews with Asian American authors. The extensive links cover literary journals, poetry, newspapers and magazines, publishers, theater and Asian American studies.

*Teaching Asian American Literature*

[http://www.georgetown.edu/tamlit/essays/asian\\_am.html](http://www.georgetown.edu/tamlit/essays/asian_am.html)

Written by the late Dr. Amy Ling, a noted scholar at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, this essay from the *Heath Anthology Newsletter* sets the stage for students new to the field.

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*African American Literature*

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From the Ethnic Studies Project at the University of Southern California, this site contains resources on African American literature, literary criticism, articles, dissertations and general reference materials.

*African American Literature and History*

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/afroamer.htm>

Includes a brief history of African American literature, online e-texts from the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center, full text poetry for several African American poets, and online resource documents on literature by and about blacks.

*African American Literature Resources (Osaka University)*

<http://jupiter.lang.osaka-u.ac.jp/~krkvl/afrolit.html>

This comprehensive list of African American literary Internet resources includes book browsers and publishers, recent publications, bibliographies, authors and their works, periodicals and criticism.

*Africana.com*

<http://www.africana.com/>

This site is produced by the co-editors of Microsoft® Encarta® Africana, including Professors Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Kwame Anthony Appiah. Its purpose is to promote understanding of black history and culture and to promote the educational use of Microsoft® Encarta® Africana in homes, schools, universities, and corporations. Coverage includes African American lifestyle, heritage, worldview and art.

*Blackwriters.org*

<http://www.blackwriters.org/nsindex.html>

*Blackwriters.org* is the Web page of the African American Online Writers Guild. The page is designed "to educate, inform, support and empower aspiring and published African American writers. . . . The Guild is dedicated to providing information, news, resources and support to Black writers while promoting the Internet as a tool for research and fellowship among the cultural writing community."

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*Women of Color, Women of Words*

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~cybers/home.html>

Based at the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies/SCILS at Rutgers University, this site is devoted to the work of African American women playwrights. It includes an alphabetical listing of resources which contain critical as well as biographical information about African American women writers. Individual writers' pages list the author's works. Books marked with the Amazon.com logo are available for sale.

### **Hispanic American Literature**

Augenbraun, Harold and Stavans, Ilan, eds. *Growing Up Latino: Memoirs and Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

Cortina, Rodolfo, ed. *Hispanic Literature: An Anthology*. Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Pub. Group, 1997.

Dick, Bruce and Sirias, Silvio, eds. *Conversations with Rudolfo Anaya*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Flores, Lauro, ed. *The Floating Borderlands: Twenty-five Years of U.S. Hispanic Literature*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998.

Gonzalez, Ray, ed. *Currents from the Dancing River: Contemporary Latino Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

Gonzalez, Ray, ed. *Mirrors Beneath the Earth: Short Fiction by Chicano Writers*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1992.  
Dist. by InBook, East Haven, CT.

Lopez, Tiffany Ana, ed. *Growing Up Chicana/o: An Anthology*. New York: Morrow, 1993.

Kanellos, Nicolas, ed. *Hispanic American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*. New York: HarperCollins College, 1995.  
Dist. by Addison Wesley Longman as part of the American Literary Survey.

Kanellos, Nicolas, ed. *Short Fiction by Hispanic Writers*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1993.

Milligan, Bruce; Guerrero, Mary, and de Hoyos, Angela, eds. *Daughters of the Fifth Sun: A Collection of Latina Fiction and Poetry*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

Poey, Delia and Suarez, Virgil, eds. *Iguana Dreams: New Latino Fiction*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992.

Poey, Delia and Suarez, Virgil, eds. *Little Havana Blues: A Cuban-American Literature Anthology*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1996.

Santiago, Roberto, ed. *BORICUAS: Influential Puerto Rican Writings -- An Anthology*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Soto, Gary, ed. *Pieces of the Heart: New Chicano Fiction*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993.

### **Internet Sites**

*Americano Literature*

<http://www.hisp.com/may99/americano.html>

In this article from the May 1999 issue of *Hispanic*, Mary Helen Ponce focuses on how Hispanic American writers have contributed to the U.S. literary landscape since the days of the early Spanish explorers. A comprehensive list of Latino literature is appended.

*CLNet - Library*

<http://clnet.ucr.edu/library/library.html>

This site from the UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center has some useful links to online collections, archives and reference resources, catalogs, publishers, books, magazines, and other electronic publications.

*Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center - Literature*

<http://www.guadalupeculturalarts.org/lit.html>

The mission of this San Antonio (Texas) Center is to preserve, promote and develop the arts and culture of the Chicano/Latino/Native American peoples. Among the activities sponsored by its literature program is the Annual San Antonio Inter-American Bookfair and Literary Festival, which features many leading Chicano writers of international importance. The festival is "the single most important public venue in the U.S. for for new Latino/a writers," according to its organizers.

*Mexican American Literature*

<http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/ethnicstudies/mexi-amer lit.html>

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From the Ethnic Studies Project at the University of Southern California, this site lists resources on Mexican American literary history and provides reference materials.

*Voces Americanas / American Voices -- A Celebration of Writing by American Authors of Latino Heritage for Readers of All Ages*

<http://www.humanities-interactive.org/vocesamericanas/index.html>

This highly graphic page is based on an exhibit sponsored by the Texas Humanities Resource Center and curated by Dr. Roberta Fernandez. Images from the title pages of numerous literary works representing Latino literature through the years are interspersed with descriptions of their contents. Of particular interest is the essay, "Thirty Years of Hispanic Literature in the United States."

<http://www.humanities-interactive.org/vocesamericanas/thirtyyears.htm>

### **Native American Literature**

Bruchac, Joseph, ed. *Returning the Gift: Poetry and Prose from the First North American Native Writers' Festival*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994.

Bruchac, Joseph; Witalec, Janet; and Malinowski, Sharon, eds. *Smoke Rising: The Native North American Literary Companion*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1995.

Forbes, Jack D. *Only Approved Indians*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1995.

Harvey, Karen, ed., with Lisa Harjo. *American Indian Voices*. Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, 1995.

Hobson, Geary, ed. *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*. Albuquerque, NM: Red Earth Press, 1979.

Isernhagen, Hartwig, ed. *Momaday, Vizenor, Armstrong: Conversations on American Indian Writing*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.

Momaday, N. Scott. *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Niatum, Duane, ed. *Harper's Anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Native American Poetry*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.

Ortiz, Simon J., ed. *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998.

Trout, Lawana, comp. *Native American Literature: An Anthology*. Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Pub. Group, 1999.

Velie, Alan R., ed. *American Indian Literature: An Anthology*. Rev. ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

Velie, Alan R., ed. *The Lightning Within: An Anthology of Contemporary American Indian Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Native American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*. New York: HarperCollins College, 1995.  
Dist. by Addison Wesley Longman as part of the American Literary Survey.

Whitson, Kathy J. *Native American Literatures: An Encyclopedia of Works, Characters, Authors, and Themes*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 1999.

Witalec, Janet, ed. *Native North American Literature*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994.

### **Internet Sites**

*American Indian Literature Resources (Osaka University)*

<http://jupiter.lang.osaka-u.ac.jp/~krkvls/literature.html>

This comprehensive list of Native American literary Internet resources includes book browsers and publishers, recent publications, bibliographies, authors and their works, periodicals and criticism.

*American Indian Online Texts (Osaka University)*

<http://jupiter.lang.osaka-u.ac.jp/~krkvls/writers.html>

Classical and contemporary prose and poetry texts can be accessed through this site as well as book reviews and interviews with Native American authors.

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*Native American Authors*

<http://www.ipl.org/ref/native>

Browsable by title, tribe and author, this site features bibliographies of published works, biographical information, and links to online resources: interviews, texts and tribal Web pages. Emphasis is given to contemporary Native American Authors.

*Native American Sites*

<http://www1.pitt.edu/~lmitten/indians.html>

Lisa A. Mitten, social science bibliographer at the University of Pittsburgh, compiled this page "to provide access to home pages of individual Native Americans and Nations, and to other sites that provide solid information about American Indians." Native American storytellers and authors are among the categories covered on this comprehensive site.

*NativeWeb*

<http://www.nativeweb.org/>

This international, nonprofit, educational organization uses the Internet to disseminate information about Native, Aboriginal, or Indigenous nations, peoples and organizations. The Resource Center provides a

searchable directory to numerous links related to Native American arts and literature.

*Storytellers: Native American Authors Online*

<http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/>

Includes links to official and unofficial home pages of Native American authors as well as some full text publications, reviews and information on upcoming events. The Native Writers Circle of the Americas awards are also described here.

<http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/awards/>

*WWW Virtual Library -- American Indians -- Index of Native American Electronic Text Resources on the Internet*

<http://www.hanksville.org/NAresources/indices/NAext.html>

Full texts of books, articles, poetry and interviews by and about Native Americans are accessible here.

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