PAST PIFF: IN THE NARRATIVE GARDEN OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

James Colbert
University of New Mexico

ABSTRACT

Working around an extended central analogy that compares the making of literature to the making of a garden, this article examines how narratives of a specific type are, and have been, privileged in American fiction and why those narratives have become thin, passionless, and pale. While examining economic factors in publishing and analyzing specific examples from short story and novel, the resistance to increasingly non-homogenized and dialectically interrelated works is explored in light of the irony and enigma it presents: why have writers resisted such change even as that change has created opportunity and yield? The imperative too often underlying the work of American writers —that permanency of identity is the only means to an orderly existence— has failed; it is in the narratives where more and different modalities of existence encompass greater variety that we have found, and *will* find, the truly *novel* in the making of contemporary American literature.

Not long ago, I rode through the heartland of America, Iowa, when the corn was high; those great, sprawling cornfields on those low rolling hills seemed vast as a sea. As someone who formerly worked a small farm, I couldn't help but make comparisons between my efforts and the efforts being made there in Iowa, and one thing I noted with interest was how a large, corporate farmer (or, more likely, a corporate-farm employee) drove a tractor compared to the way in which I had driven one. Those huge, double-wheeled, Iowan monster tractors moved straight ahead at a steady speed traversing sections big as airports, and the drivers were very nearly motionless, hunched stoically over the wheels, never looking around —to all appearances, they could have

been watching soap operas on a TV installed in the dash. Especially in comparison, driving my small tractor around twenty acres was a very active undertaking: I was constantly off the seat, looking rearward as much as forward, vigilantly checking side clearances —of course, I had to work much smaller areas with fences every few hundred feet, with a vegetable garden, a flower bed, various shrubs and trees, with grazing horses very nearly as dumb as the fence posts. Insofar as examining "the making of contemporary American fiction," if we use Jonathan Culler's brilliant analogy of literature resembling the plants in a garden, the tools used to maintain that garden —and the vastly different ways they are used— give a pretty good idea of where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going.

Literature, it has been generally conceded by all but the most calcified canonists, refers not so much to the specific properties of a given text as it does to the criteria established for it by certain social groups. Culler asks us to ask "What is a weed?" and then himself asks if there is an essence of "'weedness'—a special something, a *je ne sais quoi*, that weeds share and that distinguishes them from non-weeds" (22)? The answer, as any farmer large or small can tell you, is that weeds are simply plants that whoever is cultivating the ground doesn't want around. There is no intrinsic, definable characteristic of a weed that makes it *per se* a weed. To define *weed*, just as to define *literature*, you have to examine the motives, values, and beliefs of the people espousing the distinctions. In those Iowa cornfields, it is pretty obvious that anything that isn't corn is a weed, be it a rose bush, an orange tree, rosemary, thyme or tulip. Those particular (agri)cultural arbiters seem to favor John Deeres as their instruments of choice, but this other plot, *literature*, is tended by different apparatus.

At the 1998 Associated Writing Programs conference in Portland, Oregon, Cliff Becker, the *only* employee of the National Endowment for the Arts specializing in literature (itself, no small statement), announced the just completed sale of Random House to the large German conglomerate, Bertelsmann. "What this means," he said, "is that there are now only six commercial publishers remaining in the United States. Six." "Well, of course," Mr. Becker added in response to a question, "there are sundry subsidiaries and imprints, but no matter how the various operations are classified or broken down, the simple fact is, no two entities operating under the same corporate umbrella are going to bid against each other —the accountants just aren't going to allow it." And these six remaining publishers make no secret of the fact that they are *for-profit* businesses. For at least five years, in many and various articles the Authors Guild has been bemoaning the fact that marketing rather than editorial people are in the driver's seat of publishing, and it came as no surprise when software was developed that allows commercial publishers to plug in projections about potential markets, sales and returns, production costs —all the salient business considerations— and if these software-based projections do not promise profit, the commercial publisher will not buy a book. Simple as that. Editors powerful enough to overrule the software are few enough to count on your fingers; thus, the pathetic well-we-love-this-book-and-know-it-will-review-well-but-we-can't-get-the-numbers-to-work rejection letter. Which has further ramifications as well: while the first-novel author may or may not benefit from the lack of hard data about her or his book, heaven help the author whose last book didn't "earn out" —no matter that it reviewed well and maybe, just maybe, it didn't sell because the marketing was abys-

mal or the books were misplaced in a warehouse for two months after the advertised 'pub date' or that the house overpaid for another book so this book was treated like the proverbial ugly step-sister. Certainly in its own way this is tantamount to "economic censorship" —nothing new here— but at least it is honest and straightforward: the garden's absentee owners don't much care *what* is grown so long as it produces a profit. These people have a genuine interest in the books, all right, but their interest is in the *real* narrative of American trade and mass market —the *account* books. Not nearly so straightforward, however, are the gardeners themselves, the ones who actually shape the literary landscape, the ones who decide what is flower, what is fruit, what is vegetable— and what is weed.

Over and over in America we hear the laments about "shallow-hearted fiction" (Hendrickson), "bloodless fiction" (Evenson), fiction that produces "low-level monotony" (Guevara); and over and over we read that such stories are largely a product of writing workshops in which a narrow aesthetic prevails, in which those who "don't fit the mold can be bludgeoned by it" (Peacock qtd. in Holzer 50). While I agree that much writing-workshop fiction —from the shortest short stories to those 700-page monsters every thesis director comes to dread— is highly polished, even lyrically beautiful, prose that in the final analysis "does not substantially justify its existence" (Hendrickson 11), there is simply too much of it to lay it *all* off on workshops. As the editor of a well-established review and an avid reader, I have seen too much of this well-wrought and lifeless prose produced by writers who still think workshops are something dads have in garages and as a teacher of creative writing at both the undergraduate and graduate levels I have seen enough workshop-produced fiction with vitality and life to convince me that something much larger is afoot.

Most writers, I think, at some level come to discern that there is no underlying source of *Truth* big enough to encompass entirely the myriad realities that comprise life. Still, it seems that American writers in particular are urged in ways large and small toward a particular *type* of writing: aimed usually at life-in-suburbia angst or trailer-trash insight or alienation-desperation or, lately, toward fictional nonfiction memoirs, other than the obvious commonalities of the predominantly white and other-than-upper-class characters portrayed in a "realistic" style so peculiarly competent it is very nearly interchangeable one work to the next, this writing seems to require epiphanies so small one of my grad students, Marianne Joyce (to whom I will be forever grateful), began to identify such epiphanies as "piffs" —thus, my own identification of the genus, "piff story." Yawn. Yet if the landscape remains largely as monotonous as those beautifully cultivated cornfields —and a look through the majority of "prestigious" not-for-profit reviews, small-press publications and *literary* novels will prove that it does— the questions begin to bloom as fast as flowers in Disney fast-forward.

While we can accept that one John Grisham novel is pretty much like another because Mr. Grisham (like Ms. Steele, say, or Mr. Clancy) has, like a blind leech in a swamp, hit the pulsing vein of the lowest common denominator —which any bean counter (whether for L.A. Gear, Wal-Mart or Simon & Schuster) will tell you is Money Central— isn't *literary* work produced for readers who are willing to invest more in their reading? And for these readers' efforts aren't they rewarded with short stories and novels that foreground the language itself and that contain intrinsic elements that

stand in complex relation to each other? And, if the work is progressive enough, might not the engaged reader even be encouraged to consider questions that transcend relentless middle class introspection? Yes —and certainly these are good things. But is a piff story required —is it even possible for it— to bring these elements to the fore? No, it is not. The proof of that is in any well-wrought work that transcends the "mainstream" conventions at the same time that it actually tries to have something to say. So just what *is* going on here? It takes a while to see the pattern because the fields are so vast and the stalks so numerous, but the simple answer is that piff fiction remains in ascendancy because it works: each piece dressed up so that it seems at once new yet reassuringly familiar, it works for the writer because there are so many venues available for its publication; it works for the critic who can spend her or his time examining the line-by-line elements without having to arrive at overall conclusions that might infest the crop with a blight of questions as to whether "common sensical" approaches or "universalities" are historical constructions; it works for the teacher because without her or his help the nuances of paradox and irony might go unnoticed and, unlike in life, every question about it *can* be answered; it works because those great, institutional tractors with their combines in tow recognize that particular genus to head, thresh, clean —and publish. In short, piff fiction survives and flourishes because it advantages particular groups that for over half a century have benefitted from defining *literature* in a particular way that —shock!— well serves their own interests. And because we live in a time of enormous uncertainty the momentum is not hard to maintain as we seek out something, anything, that might represent stability —what we have become accustomed to, however, and too often do not question, is what this particular stability represents.

For the last year or so, I have kept a copy of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* cover-out on my shelf. I like to read the promotional quote from the *New York Times* on the Penguin edition that refers to Ms. Silko as "the most accomplished Native American writer of her generation." In the same way farmers often have little flower or vegetable gardens, the *literary* arbiters tolerate a touch of exotica on their property, too, something to add a little variety or color or taste; but most always that section is distinctly fenced off by just such nod-and-a-wink nuances as appear on Ms. Silko's novel —put another way, try to imagine, for example, the covers of Richard Ford's books, say, or Raymond Carver's, reading "the most accomplished middle-class Euroamerican writers of their generation." Imagine Jane Austen being classified as a "romance writer," Dostoyevsky as a "crime writer," Anthony Burgess as a "science fiction writer." It *is* hard to imagine because we have been taught that their writing is *literature*, pure and undiluted, unqualified by those deprecatory, near taxonomic epithets like "the best Asian-American" or "the best queer" or "the best African-American." Among the many examples of just such "fencing," the work of the noted *literary* writer, Richard Bausch, springs to mind because he has both written and spoken about it.

Richard Bausch's work has been published in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Southern Review*, and *Granta*. He has been included in both the *O. Henry Prize Stories* and *Best American Short Stories*, and he has twice sat on the jury for the PEN/Faulkner Award, the largest juried award for fiction in the United States. In his recent (1994) collection of short stories and a novella titled *Rare and Endangered Species*, Mr. Bausch includes an "Author's Note" that is intriguing enough to quote in full:

> There has been a tendency on the part of certain schools of so-called critical theory to make sociological and political constructs out of fictional characters. I wish to say here that concerning the characters in these stories, any resemblance to such constructs is entirely coincidental, and all resemblances to actual persons —that is, to recognizable, complicated human beings caught in their time and place— are exactly, wholly, and lovingly intended, even though I have imagined them all.

Certainly, Mr. Bausch well expresses his antipathy to literary theory; but what we must question is whether he really *has* been able to remove his characters from any social or political context or consideration. Jesse T. Airaudi quotes Mr. Bausch as saying that "for him, writing is based on a 'childlike faith' in the philosophy that what moves him will move others" (1) —and, indeed, the promotional quote on Bausch's book reinforces the notion that his stories fully capture the American experience as "ordinary Americans go about their not-so-ordinary lives" and as "Richard Bausch conveys the rhythms of [American] speech, the architecture of [American] families." Whether or not Mr. Bausch condemns the making of "sociological or political constructs out of [his] fictional characters," it is very difficult to overlook the following elements of the eight stories presented in this collection: in seven of the eight stories, the main characters are male and, in the eighth, the action of the story is triggered by a male; in the eight stories combined, only one person of color is mentioned —she doesn't actually appear— and she is a maid; the majority of the main characters have been to college; seven of eight of these male characters are employed and the eighth turns down a job; all are middle class; while one main character is twenty-six and another is seventy-four, all the others seem to be middle-aged or just the younger side of it; they are uniformly heterosexual; in six of eight stories these characters have children. So when Mr. Bausch asserts that any resemblance to a "construct" is "entirely coincidental" and at the same time his jacket copy promises "the rhythms of [American] speech, the architecture of [American] families," the unavoidable subtext is that we Americans are overwhelmingly composed of and by white, educated, middle-class, employed straight men with children —which, *coincidentally*, describes Mr. Bausch himself. Indeed this *is* a construct, and disregarding for the moment the style of the writing and even allowing for the endearing quality of anyone's "childlike faith," still it seems to me that not everyone *is* moved by what moves Mr. Bausch —at the very least, with this presumption the vast majority of the American population is put out there on the margin, and, as Muriel Harris notes, "if we disregard differences, we not only fail to understand or communicate with those unlike ourselves, we silence them by our inattention" (958). Just as farmers are having to consider new methods, however, for strikingly similar reasons in literature the indicators *do* point to change. Before discussing what approaches, though, we should take a close look at this piff genus.

Within the seed of every piff story, almost as if there were a sort of genetic code, there is a helix of reasoning that goes something like this: in order to make *literature*, in order not to pollute the *art*, it is imperative that the story not be *about* anything in any but the broadest and most general sense. There can be no agenda, no message, and certainly no intrinsic comment or larger interpretation. Rather, this *art* is one of effects, not of causes, for to examine causes impairs the requisite and singular focus

that, if this type story is to work, must remain on the text itself. This seed grows straight into the stalk, and in one way accounts for the sameness of the plants in flower: if a story isn't about anything, then it follows that not much will happen in it, either. Since this reasoning seems a little confusing, a quick look at two examples might help to illuminate what at first glance does not appear to make much sense.

Arguably, Raymond Carver has had more effect on the short story form than any other individual in the last several decades. The landscapes in his stories include divorce, separation, the interaction of couples, alcoholism, sex without love, the unhappiness of the working class, and moments just too weird to comprehend. "Neighbors" is a story worth looking at as representative of Carver's work because it includes several of the elements he comes back to time and again. As the story opens, Bill and Arlene Miller are saying goodbye to their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone, who are leaving town. Since they live across the hall from the Stones, the Millers have agreed to look in on the Stones' apartment and to feed their cat. Very nearly as soon as the Stones leave, Bill Miller visits their apartment and begins to go through it and to treat it as his own. He goes through the cabinets and cupboards; he drinks the liquor; in short order he is trying on their clothes, both Harriet's and Jim's. Though we never actually see it, it becomes apparent that at other times Bill's wife is doing pretty much the same thing, and for reasons that are never explained, this interloping into their neighbors' lives is adding sexual energy to their relationship. "Let's go to bed, honey," Bill says after his first visit across the hall. "Let's go to bed," he says in anticipation of another. Then it's Arlene's turn, and she finds "some pictures," but she has left behind the key to the apartment and they are locked out. "'My God,'" she said. "'I left the key inside.'" And the ending plays out:

> He tried the knob. It was locked. Then she tried the knob. It would not turn. Her lips were parted, and her breathing was hard, expectant. He opened his arms and she moved into them.
> "Don't worry," he said into her ear. "For God's sake, don't worry."
> They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves (14).

While if we look hard we might find some sort of theme in, say, the inability to live others' lives, since Carver himself was "a little uncomfortable" (interview) with themes and since the story does not lend itself to such scrutiny, we do not have to make such a stretch. Taking another tack, though, we *can* find in the story perfect piff: the characters are white and middle class and the younger side of middle-aged; the point of view largely encompasses the male; the story of itself is not *about* anything so the crisp writing is brought to the fore; the story poses no significant questions or opportunities for commentary beyond its own line-by-line construction; there is a touch of paradox in these good neighbors' behavior and a little irony in the end when they are finally locked out; what the story offers most readily is merely a look at itself —perfect piff! Piff, however, is not limited to short stories and can, indeed, transcend both form and length.

By any measure, *Independence Day* is a *long* book. In the hardcover edition, four hundred fifty-one pages of fairly small print run border-to-border —no one is going

to mistake this for any kind of *short* story. *Independence Day* is the 1996 Pulitzer Prize winning, PEN/Faulkner Award winning sequel to Richard Ford's 1986 novel, *The Sportswriter*; now, though, the first-person narrator, Frank Bascombe, is no longer a sportswriter but a real estate agent, having turned away from writing about sports as well as earlier success writing short stories. Bascombe is divorced and his ex-wife has remarried; he himself has a girlfriend. His son, Paul, a product of the union between Frank and his ex-wife, has many problems. The skinny of the story is that Frank will make a trip with his son over the Fourth-of-July weekend, and in the course of his trip, they will re-establish a father-son relationship by visiting as many sports halls of fame as possible. Along the way, he will deal with his ex-wife and her husband, his girlfriend, and a client-couple relocating from Vermont that is having some trouble purchasing a house. Several reviewers —and the flap copy as well— have referred to this work as "a visionary account of American life... *Independence Day* reveals a man and a country..." A quote from *Publishers Weekly*, also on the flap, observes that "If it were possible to write a Great American Novel of this time in our lives, this is what it would look like." As with Bausch's stories, however, we might want to consider *whose* story constitutes such American essence, within what fence this American *literature* lies.

Clearly, Frank Bascombe fits Bausch's American paradigm —white, male, middle-aged, college educated, middle class, employed, straight, divorced, two children— but just as clearly Bausch's characters are a toned down version of Ford's. Not only is Frank Bascombe more than well fixed financially (he owns three houses outright, two of them rentals, his own business, and is a successful realtor in an affluent area who has, in addition, a "healthy annuity" (108) established when his old house sold for "an eye-popping million two" (107) but also Frank is firmly fixed in his understanding that minorities and ethnicities not his own are the cause of most of his immediate troubles. His son is arrested by a Vietnamese security person; he has himself been "bonked in the head by a big Asian kid" (139); his black tenant is a major, threatening, ongoing problem; his hot dog business is threatened by Mexicans, well, maybe Hondurans. At the same time, though, he does recognize that such 'elements' are integral to our society: when he is hungry he wishes for "a good guinea restaurant" (288) and he acknowledges the "Jap car dealer" (425) and he engages his black secretary in an improbable sexual affair, which he partially explains as due to the fact that "She in many ways dressed and conducted herself exactly like the local white girls... and for that reason seemed to me quite old-fashioned and familiar" (211). In Frank's lexicon, most all blacks are negroes, and men he doesn't like have small dicks. Similarly, he certainly does not object when a fellow realtor notes that "he jewed the girl" (333) and he is terribly affronted when a client thinks he might be "a homo" (192). While Frank doesn't stop there in defining himself as "arch-ordinary American" (141), as his relentless angst proves, Frank *per se* doesn't think that he's so terribly good, just that these 'elements' have not achieved his level and his wisdom and, as a result, his own sort of higher evolution invests him with certain near-obligations, though as he admits he has probably "contributed as little to the commonweal as it was possible for a busy man to contribute without being plain evil" (25). Insofar as his business goes, on the one hand Frank believes that his employee is "much happier being an employee than running the show" (133), and on the other, in a meta-

phor that may be extended from the title of the work itself to include American history from the time of "first contact," he feels he is "the perfect modern landlord: a man of superior sympathies and sound investments, with something to donate from years of accumulated life led thoughtfully if not always at complete peace" (27) —so long as he doesn't have to do the work himself (27), associate with his underling (140), and so long as he *does* maintain "controlling interest" (133). And while it is tempting to go on to explore, among other things, Frank's (alleged by his ex-wife) cowardice and self-expressed lack of purpose, his envy of those who have even more money than he, his mention of having been in the Marines and the inference of trouble which then is never explained, the single hint of *where* such essential *American* values come from is a point more worthy of exploration.

Independence Day, as Frank explains it, is a holiday of "practical importance to the task of holding back wild and dark misrule" (425) which presumably was in effect before Euroamericans established what Ward Churchill defines as a "settler-state," and within this "practical importance" "we should all just get on with being independent, given that it is after all the normal, commonsensical human condition, to be taken for granted unless opposed or thwarted, in which case unreserved, even absurd measures should be taken to restore it" (425). And, though Frank himself is unaware of it —and after at least 200,000 words— for the first time he alludes to causes rather than effects. Though certainly among the four hundred or so successful, sophisticated and acknowledged societies already in place at the time of "first contact," the majority would no doubt argue the state of "wild and dark misrule" (particularly in light of what has come since), behind Frank's assertion of his own view of the "commonsensical human condition," behind the form of the independence he asserts and the consequences of violating it even though it is very narrowly defined, is the not so thinly veiled threat on which all stands and has stood for centuries: do what we say or we'll bomb you back to the stone age or genocide you through every available means, some quite imaginative. This is, finally, the foundation upon which Frank's privilege is built, though it remains his contention that he comes with the "built-in-America realization that we're just like the other schmo

... all of us popped out of the same unchinkable mold" (57).

In an interview with *Salon Magazine*, Mr. Ford quotes a line of Henry Miller's: "One of the most interesting things I've heard anyone say: 'Never think of a surface except as a volume'" (9). And, indeed, Frank Bascombe is *all* surface, though a surface that is, in places, quite beautifully portrayed. The nuances of character, the settings, descriptions, voice and tone are all well enough rendered as to be bulletproof in even the worst firefight of a workshop —and certainly the work's strength resides in analysis at the line-by-line level. Yet because Frank insists that he is "just like the other schmo," which quite obviously he isn't, and because he examines every moment at length without ever contextualizing his own understanding, the book never gives us that moment when "Unexpected connections begin to surface; hidden causes become plain" (Gardner 184). Rather, there is only "the climatic moment of recognition or understanding on the part of the central character" (Gardner 184) and that with the help of a character necessarily introduced right at the end. Frank Bascombe has reached a sort of stasis within which certain events may be possible for him —maybe not— but his own understanding remains limited and the stasis itself *is* one of his goals because this is *not* a man who

wants things to change. Why should he? Thus the form is the content, and, once again, the book offers primarily a look at itself through the lens of an extremely limited racial, ethnic and socio-economic strata —all other points of view have been trimmed out one deprecating nip at a time. And while I do think Mr. Ford is to be congratulated for bringing canonical texts right up to state-of-the-art, I also think that with *Independence Day* he proves that piff is not limited by length; but, as previously noted, in American literature as in American farming, the indicators *do* point to change.

Agronomists are coming to realize that the 'mono-crop' is extremely fragile, subject, as it is, to erosion, the necessity of herbicides, susceptibility to epidemics, and that, insofar as farming goes, there is "no stability without diversity" (Wolkomir 212). Further, phosphates, a key ingredient in the fertilizers these crops require, are being depleted, and "in fifty years, phosphates will be gone" (Mt. Pleasant qtd. in Wolkomir 212). Similarly, I believe, the world is running out of piff story *readers* and at the same time first-rate writers, tired of being paid in copies and/or two- or three-figure advances, are realizing the fragility of, and lack of yield in, their own positions. Even an organization as crown-jewel venerated and slow to change as the Modern Language Association is calling for a re-assessment of language-career goals with the idea that "intelligent diversification offers the best hope" (Showalter 3), but this, it seems to me, is a belated attempt to keep the workers from abandoning the field because, increasingly, more sophisticated readers, entranced by non-homogenized, *novel* voices that actually try to say something relevant to real-world problems, are turning away from "mainstream" texts and as a result previously marginal, 'subaltern' and 'genre-limited' writers have begun to garner attention and well-deserved, *unqualified* praise for their work. And while it is too much to expect that the 'mono-crop' will simply disappear (at least not until we *do* use up all the phosphates), what we will see more of will be increasingly dialectically interrelated, more like a "three sisters" agriculture in which corn, beans and squash are interplanted, each one working not only to produce its own yield but also to benefit the other crops in proximity. (This would seem to beg analogy to that fancy term 'intertexuality,' which is the argument that all works are made out of other works or, at least, that every linguistic 'event' stands in dialogic relation to other discourses. But while this comparison can be made *in part*, recent discussions of intertextuality stress that present works are for the most part derivative and transformative —something the three sisters would certainly shake their respective heads about because these crops do not derive one from the other and they do not transform one another, but, working like a team, each reinforces and balances the other to create distinct, discrete, *non*-homogeneous yields. And even if the reader-consumer tosses these very different vegetables into a personal gumbo of ideological, generic, predispositional ingredients, it would take a *really* egocentric cook to declare that she or he had created a hybrid rather than a recipe.) Yet in the country that developed the assembly-line compartmentalization of labor and in which millions aspire to live in one-in-seven-houses-just-alike subdivisions, in a nation obsessed with quantification and categorization, it would seem that giving up the mono-crop would meet with considerable resistance, if only because those to-the-horizon furrows are just so neat and tidy, so geometrically pleasing. But that, at least, is not so: this is America and few would argue that, as a rule, a contest between aesthetics and bottom line is no contest at all. So while intercropping appears to be something of a mess, what with soil mounded here, last

season's pulled-up plants rotting there, seedlings poking up helter-skelter, for writers as well as for farmers it will be that simultaneity of mutually-reinforcing phases and species that creates opportunity and yield. Which makes its own sense: to those who have ever stopped to observe, the mutuality of various phases among a very nearly limitless variety much more closely resembles the *global* eco-systems of both literature and agriculture —a variety that American practices in particular have seemed intent upon delimiting. Fortunately, as Gerald Vizenor notes, "If a culture lives it changes, it always changes" (164).

It is not hyperbole, I think, to observe that many of what have been the mainstays of American literature are failing; in a nutshell, the reason for those failures is simply that, because countertexts to our national metanarrative have been systematically excluded, the Euroamerican cultural arbiters have, finally, portrayed and studied only themselves. And those fields are depleted, dried up, exhausted, about as productive as the Royal Family. Yet even before there *was* a Euroamerican culture, as Paula Gunn Allen notes, "... the oldest First Nations traditions... [were founded on] inclusion, incorporation, and transformations" (13). Such an orientation, so polar opposite the one that came along with the pioneer-invaders, created an environment of constant renewal and rejuvenated imagination at the same time that it left those First Nations vulnerable to acquisitive, materialistic values that did everything *but* accept "an openly acknowledged relationship to all varieties of consciousness" (Allen 14). Without jumping into what Louis Owens so well expresses about the "pattern of marginalization and erasure of the minority voice in the Western world... whenever marginal people come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the Western imagination" (18), what we can readily discern is that *with* "inclusion and incorporation" and *without* such self-serving singularity of focus 'well-defined and objective' become relative, contingent, responsive, *alive* determinations that contextualize individual experience rather than reinforce a rigid, compartmentalized sense of the self. Inevitably, we are moving toward the recognition that the only certainty we can know is the certainty of change, and with that movement even the most retrogressive are being forced to concede that political convictions inform their stances. No longer are inflexible pundits being allowed to foreclose debate simply by asserting that their knowledge alone is objective and apolitical. All is subject to question and with this questioning, ironically and tragically, the direction of our most progressive change resembles nothing so much as that which we have tried so relentlessly and in so many ways to eradicate. "... permanency of identity," Allen reminds us, "is neither basic nor even necessary to orderly human existence... and while boundary crossing is fraught with dangers... the even greater danger [is] of fixing those boundaries" (16). Which is exactly what we have seen. And which is exactly what makes this such an exciting time because, in fact, the boundaries *are* coming down.

Over twenty years ago, Terry Eagleton noted that "Literature may be an artifact, a product of social consciousness, a world vision; but it is also an *industry*... It is easy... to forget this fact, since literature deals with human consciousness and tempts those of us who are students of it to rest content within that realm" (60). And Eagleton goes on to explain that because books *are* an industry, the industry is not "an external fact... to be delegated to the sociologist of literature but [a circumstance] which closely determines the nature of art itself" (60). Indeed, how could it not? And even though

there may be only six commercial publishers left, among those six and all their imprints, in their clear intent to make money, these publishers will allow the market to float: at the same time that they try to shape it, they will provide what they determine the market wants. "The real key to selling books is word of mouth," the former editor-in-chief of Random House said. "No matter how much you spend, you can't buy that" (qtd in Bear 94). So while these publishers will be looking at specific indicators (for example, from the 1940s to the 1980s women wrote only twenty percent of *The New York Times* number one bestsellers but in 1996 women wrote fully half; since 1918, of the seventy-one Pulitzer prizes awarded, only twenty-four have gone to women, but a full one-quarter of those came in the last thirteen years; the Modern Library had to back pedal —and fast— away from its own list of the best 100 books written in the twentieth century when an uproar greeted their predictable, tired and elitist selections) what the publishers are listening for is very nearly what we listen for as readers: a new voice, a *novel* voice, other-than-mainstream-realistic-*literary* fiction, fiction that reinforces and benefits the palette of Modernist fiction, postmodern fiction, imaginative and magical realist fiction, regionalist fiction and fiction by European, African, Asian, Native American, Latino, Chicano writers and even writers of popular fiction, by queer writers and feminist writers and neohumanist writers. These same publishers are not so unaware that they don't see the calls for papers about 'women in Philadelphia' or 'the African-American experience in the 1950s' or 'special' Indian issues of previously untouchably canonical reviews or the appearance of stories about transitions and borders and liminality or fiction that actually addresses *issues* or Art Spiegelman winning a Pulitzer Prize for fiction for a comic book. Books' value, whether literary or market, is not intrinsic; rather, it comes from very human individual relations to them: one person's weed is another person's food, no matter what we have been taught. But what is new here is not that publishers are branching out but the way in which they are going about it.

Diversity —and the attempt to achieve it— is, of course, old news, and it was never very good news because as Leo Cabranes-Grant points out, "For the multicultural perspective, ethnicities are almost like Platonic forms that might coincide with one another under certain circumstances but that remain, in a Cartesian fantasy, clearly and distinctly separated or unmixed" (182). But along the whole spectrum from race to religion to language we are realizing that different modalities of existence *can* simultaneously share a single space, that the boundaries *can* be crossed and that attempts to reinforce pre-packaged objectivities *are* failing. And, yes, as we move toward a culture of inclusion and the narrative that will emanate from it, there *will* be enormously complex —and even unanswerable— questions. Many texts already subvert and deconstruct the basic identifying features of conventional American narrative, but in order to determine which text is doing what and to make an informed decision about what a particular narrative is accomplishing and whether or not it is of value —either of itself or as it benefits narratology in whole or in part— the gardeners will have to develop new tools and new approaches. They will have to spend more time on the ground looking closely and less time hunched stoically in the air-conditioned cockpits of their increasingly ineffective machines. New technologies, new combinations of established forms, new formats, true hybrids, emergent techniques, the compost of the strictly canonical all will reinforce and benefit the whole as read-

ers consider the narrative's place in the garden and, more importantly, reflect on the logic behind its creation. For the artist, what this translates into is a circumstance in which the only limits are self-imposed, and, just as certainly as when a market appears an industry pops up to service it, in America what we will see is the appearance of more and different modalities of experience and presentation encompassing greater varieties of consciousness —and a whole lot less piff. And with a little luck and though more than a little belated, we will see the earth itself enriched for the many rather than depleted for the few, which is not as naively optimistic as it might seem at first for without some more holistic perspective, without charging "humanity [with the] crucial responsibility for the care of the world we inhabit" (Owens 29), it will not be just the making of narrative that is in question.

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