

Introduction

An “old friend”—how often do you hear novels or even writers referred to that way? Bringing our eyes to the contemporary American fiction which so closely corresponds with our own lives I have been faced with the dilemma of updating the new ways of perceiving it. When poststructuralist ideas became definitively established in the 60s and 70s, many asked whether it marked the death of literature as we know it. Now, nearly three decades later, literature is still a source of controversy and some confusion, but the questions are different. This rich and, in many ways, daring *RCEI* issue is bound to appeal to those who still feel fascinated by the new proposals and formal approaches exhibited by American fiction writers. The title, “The Making of Contemporary American Fiction,” was intended to let the contributors concentrate on the mechanisms that have remained untouched or are being innovated within this fiction. The result is a collection of essays showing evolutionary designs by writers who show their complexities and familiarities to thousands of readers.

By contemporary I mean the last three decades. After all these years we can still appreciate a continued compactness in American literature as a whole and more specifically in those fiction writers whose new literary performances are really outstanding. Of course, you will have your own choice but I recommend that all you need is to follow these contributors set to prominent topics, through superbly drawn reasonings serving a wide range of interests. Indeed, all the contributions sound like sheer magic. I was quite aware that this issue could be improved considerably, especially in the area of intellectual and sensitive acuity. No matter how exciting or interesting to edit an issue might be, without that sharpness it falls short of its true potential. That sharpness requires a combination of top-quality writing coupled to a truly original precision approach to the subject. Given the goal of optimum research/performance, I found that inviting specific scholars geared to their areas of interest provided a better picture than trying to transform this issue into a “jack of one trade.” In considering our audience, I found that the research needs of our community varied considerably. Some researchers tend to concentrate on ethnic or minority fictions, others prefer to remain more traditional while others want to write about new experimental and inno-

vative approaches within American fiction. In addition to the essays, an interview extends our focal range to include Ted Mooney. However, all the essays share a basic concern, to offer those features of excellence of the novels and to reach the common goal —suggesting the best possible conclusions.

Here the need arises to distinguish the different literary modes, recognize the alternatives and reconsider correspondences between the different subgroups that make up the diversity of American fiction. It is true that many of the authors and proposals studied here are moved along by winding paths that demand greater sophistication from the reader, but is equally true that our contributors have responded with a cognitive communication. Considering for a moment the images, materials and structures used in the fiction of Kathy Acker, William Burroughs or Tom La Farge, one recognizes that they carry us to the inventive nature of language, as inserted in a lively process to be continually re-constructed. But even within these radical experiments we also have the clear presence of the Self. Since the 1980s these aspects have acquired a powerful presence among us, drawing attention not to the author as a stylist or skillful storyteller, but also to the narration itself and the problems it poses for our own selves. Reader-response critics like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish or Mikhail Bakhtin have been trying to re-consider aspects like meaning, validity and even truth in regard to the reader. Their strategies have given the reader the opportunity of being responsible for the story, the chapter, the paragraph and even the sentences, recognizing that any paradigm can always be reformed. I think for the first time we should not assume models but exercise more than ever our sensitivity in appreciating representation along with its causes and effects.

These essays bring voices and forms which historicize our human condition. But the activity of reading allow us to dehistoricize and re-situate issues such as race, economy, ecology, literary technique, human relationships... It is in this way I appreciate most the continual re-enactments of today's American fiction. The effects are multiple and can be drawn from any writer analyzed among these pages. For example, if there is any contemporary fiction writer who demands top-notch literary performance plus more than a dash of exclusivity, it is Kathy Acker. Her experimental writing is analyzed by Joseph Conte, emphasizing that her writing combines anarchy and discipline as complimentary needs in order to create. Conte's suggestive conclusion is determinant in appreciating Acker's literary richness: "Spontaneity *and* organization. Beauty *and* violence. A rose *and* a sword." The same spirit of imagination and innovation that helped create the former article can be found in La Monda Horton-Stallings's critical approach to the role of sexuality as an aesthetics in the black oral tradition. John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* represents a critical example of the intersection of identity factors (language, sexuality, race) conveying the complexity and reappraisal of African-American fiction. The third essay of this issue is written by James Colbert and makes me ask you a simple question, can't decide what kind of fiction today you want? What different literary model goes well with modern urbanites? Then consider the Colbert piece, which gives you a new term for a known fiction model, "piff fiction." Perhaps there's no better example of the current gap between different ways of writing than this one, where the "gardeners" will have to develop new imaginative creations to oppose a "piff fiction," where "There can be no agenda, no message, and certainly no intrinsic comment or larger interpretation."

Is there any writer more influential (for bad or good) than William Burroughs? Most of today's writers have taken the boundaries of Burroughs's technique as a reference. For most, Burroughs's style is the fiction of choice although for a few others, his literary innovations are the beats of a different drummer. Davis Schneiderman centers on Burroughs's conception of prose "as the ability of language to serve as a locus of resistance and the inability of discourse to completely transcend or supplant social control." Need more of a recommendation? David Clippinger deals with one of the patriarchs of contemporary the American novel for nearly three decades. Don DeLillo's solid development is one of the reasons for such remarkable longevity. Clippinger considers DeLillo's *Underworld* as a novel which criticizes American materialistic culture against the backdrop of Puritan ideology. His reading of *Underworld* suggests that capitalism has swamped American society, best characterized in Clippinger's words as "an underworld built upon the garbage of despiritualized Puritan capitalism." A strong consideration, is it not? Fiction writer Tom La Farge introduces the concept of readerly writing which conceives the process of composition along with the experience of reading. According to La Farge, the writer has to peel away the superficialities and sophisticated devices that emerge in today's novels and to delve into the kernel of the novel. If so, we will be able to see "the matter exfoliating in creaturely gestures of language that reify the directions and energies without subjecting them to thematic triage." Definitely. I am the first to agree with Megan Simpson's essay that one of the most suitable ways to ungender creative work is through experimental techniques which obliterate binary oppositions. She analyzes five novels written by women to explore how gendered subjectivity is constructed and/or how they propose alternatives to normative models of gendered subjectivity. The next essay is written by James Keegan who centers on Sherman Alexie's fiction showing the necessity of being responsive to cultures other than our own. Keegan's approach to Alexie is culturally sensitive in the broadest sense. His article offers a powerful picture of that dialectical struggle which persists within Native American community: assimilation and reservation. Fiction related to the American experience in Vietnam is brought to these pages by James Schramer who demonstrates that Tim O'Brien's "magical realism" is a result of political and social conditions in American society from the World War II up to the Vietnam War. The increasing emphasis on accepting the reality of that war and its consequences has helped to overcome confusion and frustrations. O'Brien's stories seem to include a value of responsibility which sets him apart from other conventional stories which appear simply to offer "more of the same." Karl E. Jirgens's thoughtfully designed article is an excellent companion to re-define fiction. Of course, you have to be familiar with the work of the more than seven writers analyzed or researched by Jirgens to perceive the relationship of "techne" and "physis." Media and culture appear inextricably connected with literature. Special emphasis is made on Nicole Brossard's work.

Using Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Robert Young's essay daring leap proves to be suggestive. Young takes another jump ahead of the traditional concept of American identity as basically aligned with the white middle class, to imply that American fiction, and American identity as well, is determined by the invisible presence of African-American subjectivity. In fact, he presents the today recurrent question concerned with the Other: "both texts enact an ideologi-

cal operation that diverts attention from the politics of cognition and from the ideological struggles over the real.” My own essay shows another line within American fiction, being centered on the study of a “special” autobiography. Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* exhibits an obliteration of boundaries, experiments through the continual use of the “chaotic” fragment and exclusive attention on the sentence itself, ultimately testing our modes of perception. Life is seen as a continual process of re-construction involving long-standing themes for all human beings. No description of this issue would be complete without a mention of Priscilla Wald’s essay which centers on the ghetto and its role within American culture, more specifically its relevance for the Jewish community. With a special focus on the “contemporary anxieties about cultural contact,” she shows cosmopolitanism along with assimilation and Americanization. Is that all? No. This issue of *RCEI* also includes an interview. As always expected from the expert hands of Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory we are introduced to the work of Ted Mooney in his own words. First, you will notice that all questions serve to uncover new intricacies and technical devices used by this writer. Each question leaves you wondering what’s next. Mooney’s insistence on a culture which runs on hyperconsumer capitalism gives the final impression that people “don’t live with facts. They live with contingencies.”

If this issue of *RCEI* has a down side, it’s probably the lack of space for including more essays and approaches to contemporary American fiction. Want more views and subjects dealing with this fascinating field? I am afraid you’ll have to wait a while but I promise to come back as soon as I get another opportunity. Like any special issue, it offers but a few articles which show the huge field where American fiction writers are themselves today. I am sure that a special section to come devoted to this matter will re-evaluate the approaches developed here. I really think these essays will be seen as reference points for the discriminating reader of the future. Finally, my thanks are due to my colleague, Marie McMahon, for her invaluable help and friendliness in the editing of this issue. Also to John Amador Bedford for his suggestions in the early phase of this project. And lastly, to all the contributors who responded to my call to articulate and exhibit their ideas, bringing new perceptions to the many complexities of this literary field. Excuse me once again but I can only end on a note of continued fascination with the reading of these essays and feel obliged to exclaim, what an issue!

M.B.