
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the PMLA authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981 (fax: 212 533-0680).

An All-American Cultural Studies

To the Editor:

The Forum of the March issue, on the relations between cultural studies and the literary (112 [1997]: 257–86), is pervaded by an anti-European feeling, evident in the recurrent reference to the *colonial* (e.g., 262, 282), in assertions of the American point of view as necessary (“Considering the complete recasting of cultural studies in the United States, it is hardly surprising that Michael Bérubé would write that no one ‘really needs or wants to hear the Birmingham-Hoggart-Williams narrative’ about the British origins of cultural studies” [Neil Nehring, 265]; “American scholars have . . . insisted on a distinctly American version [of British cultural studies]” [Vilashini Cooppan, 278]), and in the emphasis on popular American culture. And yet, astoundingly, many of the scholars cited as fundamental in this Forum are British, German, or French. Is not that a contradiction? Why not reject all those Europeans and declare the originality of the American way of life? This would stimulate the inventory of what is specifically American and help to outline the characteristics of the American culture.

These contributions practically sent me back thirty years. The aggressive political attitude of some of the writers, their tone of contempt for what does not belong to their side, and the references to Marxism (in 1997!) reminded me of the atmosphere I met with when I started my studies at Nanterre in 1968. The most-cited French thinkers today—L. Althusser, M. Foucault, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, P. Bourdieu, J. Derrida, J.-F. Lyotard, J. Lacan, J. Baudrillard, and R. Barthes—were then entering the bright parts of their careers. We had to read them. Some were intellectually stimulating. But the jargon they used (especially Lacan, who is incomprehensible) quickly exasperated me, since everyone imitated it. It seemed that all the ideas of more than one author consisted in this recognizable way of writing. Sometimes I still encounter a text written that way, and my first impulse is to skip the paper and look for one with a clear and straightforward expression. Except for Bourdieu, who still holds a place in the French debate, the others have shrunk to the proportions of specialists in their fields. Why use people who are out-of-date in addition to being European, when the proclaimed thing is the importance of America today? That seems another mystery.

Thirty years ago Pierre Francastel proposed something that, if I am not mistaken, looked like cultural studies. Who knows him or cares about his work today? And did not G. Duby work on a similar project? Is not this trend well illustrated by L. Febvre and the *Annales* school, with F. Braudel, E. Leroy-Ladurie,

and J. Le Goff? They would not have agreed, however, with the current bias that sees “literary tradition . . . as hopelessly elitist and retrograde,” noted in the Forum by Katie Trumpener and Richard Maxwell (263). But all these men were or are French (cf. Thomas Pavel’s remarks about “highly literate cultures” [268]). So perhaps they should not be taken as models by American scholars. As historians they admitted, I think, that each period has its way of thinking and should be treated according to its characteristics. The twentieth century will probably appear to be defined by something more complex than a political division between an “elite” and popular attitudes. Why, then, since most of the Forum writers are American, does no one recall the role played by Andy Warhol and his sharp critiques of industrial productions; Claes Oldenburg (although Dutch, he has produced the major part of his pop art work in the United States), who created enormous hamburgers; Duane Hanson, portrayer of average people in their average lives, such as a housewife pushing her cart through the alleys of a supermarket; and Roy Lichtenstein and his treatment of comic strips? All their works are strongly based on American everyday life. Could not works like these be foundations for an all-American cultural studies that would at last stand up without European references?

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Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*

To the Editor:

I read with interest Jahan Ramazani’s essay, “The Wound of History: Walcott’s *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction” (112 [1997]: 405–17), for I have recently been writing on Walcott’s masterpiece and have often taught it. Although I doubt that any scholar can account for every allusion in a work that plays so profoundly on what might be called the “rhymes,” or slanted repetitions and coincidences, of history, I thought that Ramazani and the readers of *PMLA* would be interested to know more about Catherine Weldon, who is described in the essay as “a white settler woman of the American plains” to whom “Walcott attributes . . . ‘the wound of her son’s // death from a rusty nail’” (414).

Weldon has in fact a more complex relation to the poem’s critique of imperialism and to the theme of Philoctete’s wound. Catherine Weldon went west from Brooklyn alone in 1889 as the field representative of the National Indian Defense Association. Later she had her

young son, Christie, sent to join her. She learned Sioux, became a close associate of Sitting Bull, and was for a time a member of his household. She translated works of occidental history for the Sioux, including stories of the Trojan War. Because of her support for Sitting Bull’s cause, the government exiled her to Parkins’ Farm, a nearby homestead, where she lived in a sod-roofed hut and continued her activities on behalf of Indian rights. (Walcott plays in a number of places with dropped *s*’s in *Omeros*, making Philoctete from Philoctetes, Achilles from Achilles, Parkin Farm from Parkins’ Farm.) Weldon was a witness to the Ghost Dance uprising, and her public opposition to it strained her relations with native leaders. During the violence of 1890 Christie “stepped on a rusty nail which pierced shoe leather to lacerate and infect his right foot. The wound stubbornly refused to heal,” and the boy died of lockjaw (David Humphreys Miller, *Ghost Dance* [Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985] 133).

Omeros includes elliptically many of these details of Weldon’s history, and a number of them further the theme of the wound pursued by Ramazani. Walcott continues the tragic story of the Sioux after Sitting Bull’s death as he shows Weldon meditating on the massacre of Sioux men, women, and children in the last days of their nation—the massacre known as Wounded Knee.

See J. Mooney, *Fourteenth Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (1896); Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963); Stanley Vestal [Walter S. Campbell], *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* (Boston: Houghton, 1932); and, for Catherine Weldon’s letters, Stanley Vestal [Walter S. Campbell], ed., *New Sources of Indian History, 1850–1891* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1934).

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The MLA’s Poet Presidents

To the Editor:

Referring to James Russell Lowell’s importance to her, Sandra M. Gilbert wrote in the 1996 Presidential Address (112 [1997]: 370–79) that “unless I am doing a grave injustice to one of the 103 colleagues who held this office between his tenure and mine, I believe I am the first poet to preside over the MLA since he did” (372). In MLA history, Houston A. Baker, Jr., stands between Lowell and Gilbert. Baker, who has published three books of poetry, was included in my anthology *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African American Poetry* (1997) because he