Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

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I want to take up the question of multiculturalism by addressing the subject of anthologies, not only because they are one of the major ways of bringing together texts from a variety of cultural traditions but also because anthologies that are explicitly multicultural—as anthologies of American literature are increasingly tending to be—are also a means of constructing in miniature textual versions of a larger multicultural society.\textsuperscript{1} Anthologies are, in a significant way, representations of the wider social text, figurations of the body politic; their compilation and use is thus fraught with social and political meaning and responsibility. What conservatives see as the illegitimate contamination of anthologies and the literature classroom with other (justly or unjustly) analogous structures is neither hypothetical nor improbable. It is one of the immediate
effects of putting the anthology form to use and it may well be one of the few
effects to have a long, complex, and indirect life, a life that continues to
reverberate long after students may have forgotten many of the texts they
actually read in class.

Both here and in the second section of the book, therefore, I part company
with John Guillory’s often persuasive Cultural Capital. Unlike Guillory, I believe
the content of the curriculum matters a great deal and that changes in widely
used texts can have significant social impact. I also think it matters what kinds
of knowledge count as cultural capital and that when repressed or marginalized
traditions achieve that status other changes may open up as a result. While
canonical representation does not map directly onto social representation, the
two are complexly related, and the wider nets cast by comprehensive anthologies
can create powerful simulacra of social formations. That is not to diminish the
importance of who has access to education but rather to grant equal importance
to what they are taught. Here I take that issue up in relation to anthologies.

The anthology as a single bound book, of course, has parallels with a similar
structure that all college teachers assemble—the semester’s syllabus or reading
list. The book has higher visibility and a wider audience, but the same issues of
inclusion or exclusion obtain; in that sense, then, all teachers are anthologists.
In both cases the priority placed on multicultural representation in the classroom
helps persuade students about the priority of multicultural representation on the
faculty and in the student body. The admissions policy embodied in the
anthology makes an implicit comment on the admissions policy appropriate to
the institution as a whole. Nor is it much of a leap to make a connection with
the nation’s admission policy—its immigration statutes and their mixed and
still politically contentious history of openness and racism in the 1990s. The
problems of ethnic, racial, and gender representation in an anthology devoted to
a nation’s history or its literature—an anthologies that are common not only in
the United States but in other countries as well—speak quite directly to
questions about representation in public debate and in legislative bodies. Anthol-
ogies empower students to make these connections, whether or not teachers
choose to make them explicit. As I began to argue in the previous chapter, these
effects are part of the cultural work anthologies and curricula do even if we
pretend they are not.

Inclusion in an anthology is not equivalent to wielding effective political
power, but neither are discursive and political representation in these different
domains wholly discontinuous cultural processes. Literary and historical anthol-
ogies are not, to be sure, appropriate mechanisms for detailed social engineering;
their use and impact is too unpredictable and their relation to detailed policy
questions in other arenas entirely too oblique. But their role in promoting core
values that are exclusionary or inclusive, in valuing or devaluing minority and working-class cultures, in familiarizing readers with different traditions, and in imaging a multicultural body politic can be significant. The fact that anthologies and other educational practices cannot guarantee social change does not justify ignoring their role in promoting or discouraging it.

The cultural power wielded by anthologies used by large numbers of secondary or college students should not, therefore, be underestimated. They succeed to a significant degree in representing not only the kind of society we have been but also the sort of society we are now and have the potential to become in the future. There is no escaping those effects; the option of simply collecting texts from the past in a neutral fashion does not exist. Every choice about what to include or exclude not only grants or denies those individual texts wide visibility but also puts each included text in a dialogue with the other texts in the anthology, a dialogue that gives readers a chance to test possible class or intercultural relations and a dialogue that would otherwise not take place. Anthologies figure not only the material facts of history but also the active process of remembering and reconstructing it. They offer a reading of past social relationships and put forward opportunities for new social relations in the future. Far more is at stake, therefore, than just the already significant power to propel a poem, story, or historical document from obscurity to renown, though that is obviously among an anthology’s powers as well, especially when a little-known small press publication thereby suddenly gains a much larger audience. But anthologies do not only have radical effects on texts. They also work to recreate their readers by repositioning them in relation to a remembered past, a lived present, and an imagined future. Anthologies are hardly the only force acting in that capacity, but they are not trivial, and they will, once again, have those effects whether their editors admit it or not.

Editing an anthology of American literature is thus not only an aesthetic but also a social and political project. One must decide which racial, ethnic, and social groups to include, how much space to grant them, and whether to mix them up or group them together. A historical anthology can grant not only past but also present agency to various constituencies and political parties. One has to decide not only how such groups represent their own history but also how they represent other races, ethnicities, and political groups and indeed how they represent the nation’s various acts, ideals, and institutions. No past conversation recreated over such issues can fail to speak to the present. And nothing but the most benighted notion of evaluation would lead us to conclude that all these matters would be settled by judgments of quality or historical importance alone. For notions of quality change when different styles and forms of literary expression enter the picture, just as what counts as historically important changes
when a focus on diplomatic, military, and dominant political history is broadened to include dissident groups and everyday life. Nor does the recognition that inclusion in anthologies can help to empower gendered, ethnic, racial, and political groups settle the problem of which sorts of texts get in and which stay out. The anthologist has to decide what sort of national history he or she wants us to remember and how the relations between different groups of people have helped shape that history. It is not merely a question of whether black or white or red or yellow perspectives matter, but rather a question about what sort of voices they will have within what is necessarily a very selective frame.

An anthologist working with modern American poems must, for example, decide whether to limit the selection of Langston Hughes’s poems to his more humanistic affirmations of black identity, as most anthologists do, or to include his concise attacks on white racism and on Christian hypocrisy. Does one focus, like most anthologists, on Claude McKay’s most abstract protest poems or include the poems of explicit anguish about racial identity and rage at white America? In anthologizing the contemporary Mesquakie poet Ray Young Bear, do you include only his more affirmative poems focused on Native American culture, like “The Personification of a Name,” or pick more overtly troubled poems like “The Significance of a Water Animal” or “It Is the Fish-Faced Boy Who Struggles,” or even his towering poem of protest and indictment, “In Viewpoint: Poem for 14 Catfish and the Town of Tama, Iowa”? Does one ignore the many powerful poems protesting racism written by white Americans, instead anthologizing poems on less troubling topics? Does one include (or at least cite) some of the racist poems by major and minor white poets to show that poetry exemplified the same struggles typical of the rest of the culture or instead, again like most anthologists, allow readers to believe poets remained focused on more easily idealized subjects?

The dominant pattern for many years for general anthologies of American literature has been to seek minority poems that can be read as affirming the poet’s culture but not mounting major challenges to white readers. One of Ray Young Bear’s most regularly anthologized poems, “Grandmother,” may seem not even to have been written by a Native American when it is taken out of the context of the rest of his work. It is also, to be sure, not just a question of the nature of the poem at issue but of our reading practices, interests, and assumptions and what interpretations they are most likely to produce. But that is something an anthologist can influence. Just how much of African American history seems to be invoked by Hughes’s widely anthologized “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” will depend in part on how much knowledge the reader brings to the poem and how much of that knowledge is put in play and amplified by the other poems in the anthology, especially other poems by Hughes himself.
Simply placing “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (“I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human veins”) next to Hughes’s “The Bitter River” (“I’ve drunk of the bitter river . . . Mixed with the blood of the lynched boys”) will increase the likelihood that the earlier poem, with its references to Lincoln and the Mississippi, will carry more complex historical freight. Young Bear’s remarkable “It Is the Fish-Faced Boy Who Struggles,” in which the people come together at the end to observe ceremonies they had long forgotten, will be more marked by the history of white repression if it is read along with “In Viewpoint: Poem for 14 Catfish and the Town of Tama, Iowa.” The latter poem, moreover, is about how the genocidal mentality of the frontier survives today, so its challenge to contemporary readers is especially pointed. The poem opens by asking “in whose world do we go on living?” and proceeds to detail the ways white abuse of the Mesquakie permeates every element of daily life, from the louts who dream of bludgeoning Native Americans on a weekend to the town newspaper that dramatizes every Mesquakie offense and relegates every positive story about the tribe to the back pages.

Once editors find the courage to include more antagonistic texts, as most do not, the issues at stake become more complex and the works available richer and more varied. An anthology that aims to present multicultural history relationally and interactively, indeed, is not limited to literary works that divide easily into affirmative and negative groups. One can, for example, include white poets writing empathically, reflectively, or awkwardly about African American or Native American culture. And an accurately representative record of multicultural literary and historical relations will show that not only minority identities but also the dominant white identities come under scrutiny. One answer to the recurrent question of how to make whiteness visible in our history is simply to reprint the works that seek to do just that. In the 1920s and the 1930s, a period when writers from a variety of cultures regularly took up questions of race, that would include some of the poems I assigned in the course I will describe in chapter 5, such as Aqua Laluah’s “Lullaby,” Anne Spencer’s “White Things,” Claude McKay’s “To the White Fiends,” and Kenneth Patchen’s “Nice Day for a Lynching.”

“I’m looking for a house,” Hughes announces in a 1931 poem, “where white shadows/ Will not fall.” “There is no such house,” he answers, “No such house at all.” What does it mean, modern poets repeatedly ask, to bear on one’s body the sign of that history—white skin—the figure for a cultural dominance so omnipresent it was, like a white shadow, as though invisible? It is a question relatively few white Americans have felt impelled to ask in the eighties and nineties, though it is a question anthologists may be able to help put in play again, as Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps did in their important 1949
anthology *The Poetry of the Negro*, which included a section of poems by white poets. In her 1929 poem “Lullaby,” Laluah warns a black child not to wish for whiteness, lest he become “a shade in human draperies,” out of touch with his family and in love with death. Spencer’s 1923 “White Things” had put forward similar notions, suggesting that agents of a valorized whiteness have taken a multicolored world and “blanched [it] with their wand of power.” Lucia Trent’s 1929 poem “A White Woman Speaks” responds by declaring herself “ashamed of being white,” but Kenneth Patchen instead claims “I know that one of my hands / Is black, and one white.” What becomes clear in all these poems, perhaps because of their very dichotomous figuration, is that racial difference is relational, that its meanings are historically produced, and that one burden of our mutual history is that we are bound together in any future we can imagine. There is no way of being white in America except in relation to what it has meant to be black, no way of being black in America, in turn, except in relation to the history of whiteness.

The same year that Hughes published his poem expressing the impossible wish to be free of the presence of white shadows, he also wrote and published “Union,” in which he calls out to “the whole oppressed / Poor world, / White and black,” and urges all to “put their hands with mine” to undermine false beliefs and entrenched powers. Many have assumed “White Shadows” and “Union” to represent opposing and irreconcilable points of view rather than related (and perhaps equally necessary) perspectives growing out of the same general history. Extended beyond white/black relations to the whole multicultural field, this constructed notion of contradiction suggests that antagonism and alliance are wholly incompatible and that a multicultural anthology or society must choose one or the other. Conservative writers often argue that any recognition of class, racial, or ethnic antagonism automatically increases their power over the culture and decreases opportunities for resolution. In fact, these views can coexist in individuals just as they do in the culture. Alliances can recognize and distinguish between warranted and unwarranted antagonisms and either work through them or build them into the terms of their negotiations. A multicultural anthology can inhibit or facilitate this present and future process by virtue of how fully it represents the historical record and how successfully it facilitates comparison and contrast between different positions. Then we can not only teach the conflicts, as Gerald Graff has helpfully argued, but also work with our students to find grounds for negotiation and mutual accommodation.

Kenneth Warren has recently warned in “The Problem of Anthologies” that anthologies foster the illusion that we can easily imagine a utopia where every race and gender can amiably rub elbows together. That seems to me, however, to be less a risk inherent in the anthology form than an effect of the kinds of
anthologies cautiously liberal or politically conservative academic anthologists have assembled in recent decades, which tend to suggest that mutual tolerance is either a given or a readily achievable end. Anthologies that foreground the social conflicts American writers have struggled with would leave quite a different impression—that shared interests exist but that real differences and difficulties which must be worked on stand in the way of any alliances we might want to form. Such anthologies would also show that American poets and novelists have been passionately involved in articulating those differences. Warren also argues that newer, more racially diverse anthologies manage not so much to suggest that the kingdom of heaven has been taken by storm but rather that the meek have inherited the earth. That seems to me exactly right as a judgment about mainstream academic culture, but again it is the result of the selection academics usually make from minority and other writers. That selection, moreover, is governed not only by liberal fear of social antagonism but also by a desire to sustain a transcendentalizing version of literariness. It is more difficult to confer an aura of timeless, uncontested, universal value on a collection of works in obvious conflict with one another. Unfortunately, that means that the transhistorical values put forward by texts making aggressive attacks on injustice and urging revolutionary change get excluded from the ruling notions of literariness.

For more than a decade now, moreover, from Ronald Reagan to George Bush, from William Bennett to Lynne Cheney, from the increasingly conservative judiciary to the Republican Congress of the mid-nineties, the social imaging anthologies can do has been either directly or implicitly entangled with a broad spectrum of political issues and finally with state power itself. As our anthologies have become more multicultural, the chairs of the National Endowment for the Humanities during Republican presidencies have repeatedly insisted that there is a right and a wrong way to do multiculturalism. The right way, from Lynne Cheney’s perspective, for example, is very clear—happy family multiculturalism, with selections celebrating cultural traditions but de-emphasizing an often distinguished historical record, refraining from negative comments about other groups, and avoiding attacks on the nation-state. Conservative multiculturalism, then, would grant the impossibility of a melting pot and settle instead for a cookbook of recipes for unchallenged coexistence. It is not easy to create a multicultural literary or historical anthology that wholly honors that harmonious ideal but it is possible to come surprisingly close to doing so. In the process, we lose not only a sense of the real struggles that have shaped (and continue to shape) our history but also the terrain that must be negotiated for relations in the future.

We also lose the capacity to understand the relational nature of both past
and present identities. Identity comes into existence relationally and sustains or redefines itself the same way. When the subject positions that racial, ethnic, gendered, or class identities offer us begin to change, they do not change simply as a result of some exclusive, inner mutation; they change as part of continuing renegotiation and competition with, appeals to and resistance against, incorporations of and rejections of, other identities and cultural forces. When Ray Young Bear gave a poetry reading at the University of Illinois in 1991 and his wife Stella joined him on stage to play the drum, he noted that her decision to do so was somewhat controversial, since drum playing had traditionally been reserved for the men in his tribe. This change is hardly purely internal to Native American cultures; it takes place in response to contemporary American feminism. What we are historically is partly a function of what we did and said and what was done and said to and about us, along with how we responded to a host of other cultural representations. Groups define themselves in relation to other groups; their identity cannot be extricated from that comparative process. When identity is reinforced by a sense of group solidarity, that too remains relational. The textual history of a subculture typically embodies those negotiations. The students in our classes embody the current state of those opportunities and conflicts. There is little reason to hope we can change without acknowledging both that complex history and its current products.

One aim of happy family multiculturalism is, of course, to maintain the status quo, to preserve as long as possible the present uneven distribution of wealth, prestige, and power. Hiding past and present inequities, injustices, and antagonisms decreases the chance that they will be redressed now or ever. That is the obvious dark side of Cheney’s histrionic sermonizing. But the briefs for happy family multiculturalism also speak to another kind of fear that is more mutually warranted and thus shared by some of those who would anthologize both multiculturalism’s inner triumphs and its outwardly directed antagonisms—the fear of a balkanized body politic. To bring forward either our targeted anger or our phantasmatic misrepresentations, it is feared, would only further polarize an already fragmented cultural terrain, making relations between groups still more antagonistic.

Of course we have lived with intermittent cultural warfare across differently constituted lines of class, race, gender, and ethnicity throughout our history. And deep if still unstably articulated social antagonisms obviously remain with us today. Allowing for some notable exceptions, however, most groups seek at least temporary working alliances across battle lines when self-interest seems to argue for them. And few broadly multicultural anthologists are likely to view their enterprise as the first step in arming their constituencies for open warfare. Indeed, in a democratic society most of us need some vision of possible grounds
for improved social relations to justify our present work; except for the far Right, few in a society not literally at war can adopt organized murder as a way of dealing with diversity.

If we begin by taking a conflicted and substantially unjust present as a given, then, the question is how we might move to something better and how, in a minor way, an anthology might contribute to such a process. For the happy family folks the answer is simple—repress past and present antagonisms immediately. Indeed, they take such willed forgetfulness to be a condition for even entering into negotiations, and they would enforce those conditions with all the power available to them. Those groups that refuse to forget, say, a genocidal history and a present, at the very least, of lived inequities, are to be cast out of the social contract. Their family membership is canceled. In effect, the happy family multiculturalists have in mind an exclusionary and repressive body politic, despite their success at times in evoking a false and disingenuous liberalism based on an ideologically restricted inclusiveness. We have seen that kind of liberalism at work during the great purge of the Left in the 1950s and we know something of the monolithic right-wing culture to which it too readily capitulates. It is in fact not multiculturalism at all, but rather a monoculture in varied dress.

Such confident solutions are not available to a multiculturalism that wishes to maintain both more full historical knowledge and a greater frankness about present tensions. Reading a multicultural anthology compiled with such aims can involve powerful moments of epiphanic identification across cultural differences; it can also produce moments when difference is treasured for the sense of partially irreducible variety that is one of its pleasures. A more fully multicultural anthology will also provoke moments of self-interrogation and historical anguish. Yet such multicultural anthologies give us more still than recovered pain and ecstasy within inviolable cultural boundaries. They give us workbooks of discourses for rearticulation, texts for comparison, contrast, and realignment. They give us a discursive space in which to compare histories and test possible filiations and alliances. Properly assembled, multicultural anthologies mix utopian longings with a historical review of the fate such longings have often met in the past. They indicate some of the bases for strategic alliances across different cultures in the future, while giving voice to the forces that will resist and undermine those same alliances. They thus promote realism and vision in the context of historical reflection, empowering progressive work without simply reinforcing readers’ self-images.

There is no way of assuring that readers will put anthologies to use in that fashion, just as there is no way of suturing a multicultural society in advance of its emergence. Much like individual texts, anthologies acquire different meanings
in different contexts. Competing constituencies will construe their intertextual implications in diverse and contradictory ways. This is, to borrow a phrase Stuart Hall has put to good use, a multiculturalism “without guarantees.” That is the most we can ask for now, and it is better than the alternatives—misery, mayhem, and Republican right-wing extremism.

In moving from anthologies to political reflection on multiculturalism we need to accept the fact that there can be no secure social text to hold in view, let alone any renegotiated social space whose character can be guaranteed in advance. Despite what the Right wants to believe, the future cannot be guaranteed; all we can do is to educate ourselves about our diverse cultural traditions and try to maximize good will, while recognizing that even those ground rules will not be universally valued. What can be guaranteed, however, is that multicultural negotiations carried on in ignorance of one another’s history and traditions will be permeated with bad faith. It is also probably inevitable that the social forms that can structure such negotiations will themselves change under pressure from competing and distinctive cultural traditions. While the Right has willfully conflated culture and society, maliciously implying thereby that cultural diversity necessarily threatens the existence of any consensually maintained social institutions, there is reason to assume that cultural differences will prompt changes that cut broadly across social life. Indeed, there is sound basis to conclude that has always been the case. There is no part of social life which can be wholly protected from cultural pressures. It may not be necessary, however, that the center hold, nor even that the spaces of recognized social articulation be conceived of as exclusively central, nor even that everyone suddenly be miraculously invested in caring about our intercultural exchanges. There has not been universal, continuous engagement in public life in the past, and there is no reason to suppose we can expect it in the future. Our “common” culture, moreover, has never been common in the sense of meaning the same thing to every constituency and subculture. Nor have its elements penetrated every area of cultural life nor penetrated it to the same degree. It may be sufficient to agree that there need to be such spaces, including institutions in which power is shared, contracts and meanings are negotiated, contact is maintained, and common enterprises are agreed upon. Such spaces include our public schools and our legislatures. Those are among the places capable of producing some level of multicultural exchange; we do not need to be identical with one another and we do not need to forget our history for those institutions to function. They may even function better if we refuse to repress the past.