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Cultural Dreaming and Cultural Studies

Marianne DeKoven

IT HAS BECOME a truism that the emergence of cultural studies in American academic literature departments marks the present as a moment of significant disciplinary reconfiguration. In *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory asserts that “the several recent crises of the literary canon—its ‘opening’ to philosophical works, to works by minorities, and now to popular and mass cultural works—amounts to a terminal crisis, more than sufficient evidence of the urgent need to reconceptualize the object of literary study.”¹ Because cultural studies is at once catalyst and exemplary response to this crisis, and because important trends within cultural studies either implicitly or explicitly reject the literary as a distinct discourse, practice, and/or valuable object of critical attention, I make a case here for the literary from within (as a practitioner of) cultural studies.²

In making this case, I do not intend to advocate any neo-New-Critical, antitheoretical, apolitical, exclusive regime of literary study, canonical or otherwise, that would promulgate an ideology of literary criticism and the literary text as “ends in themselves.”³ In fact, it is precisely the political and theoretical agendas of cultural studies that elicit my fullest, most unconflicted commitment. My hope in this essay is to reconcile that commitment with my commitment to the literary.

I have always felt the need to write in what are considered literary forms: poetry, fiction, drama, journal/autobiography, then, once I found out about it, experimental mixed-genre writing like Gertrude Stein’s. This need has occupied a different—not wholly dissimilar but meaningfully distinct—psychic territory from the need to write the way I am writing here. I suspect that many of us in literary academia feel both of these needs, whether, like some, we manage to publish and gain recognition in both modes, or whether, like me, and (I expect) many others, we are more or less in the closet, or simply unsuccessful in terms of publication, as literary writers. The distinction I am making between the need to write in literary modes and the need to write in the modes of professional academia has nothing to do with the ideology that establishes a binary of literary writing as authentic, or outside the boundaries of social-cultural construction, over against an institutionally constructed and therefore somehow inauthentic professional academic

writing. Literary writing is no more or less socially constructed, no more or less authentic, than any other mode of writing. It simply occupies a meaningfully, though not entirely, different social-cultural-political-psychic territory, and offers different possibilities of agency.

This difference, of course, is not absolute. The boundaries between literary and nonliterary writing have blurred and eroded significantly in postmodernism, where essayistic writing appears regularly in fiction, critical writing more and more commonly incorporates autobiography, some theory edges toward poetry, and genre divisions are everywhere disrupted. Erosion of the distinction is not, however, the same thing as obliteration: criticism and theory are still recognizable as such, and literary writing is still recognizable as such. Moreover, new literary movements have historically emerged by incorporating heretofore non-literary uses of language. I think the need so many of us seem to feel to write in literary modes has to do with the status of literary writing as practice in contemporary American culture.⁴

Marianne Moore's poem defining poetry begins "I, too, dislike it"; in Langston Hughes's national African American anthem he writes, with a similar ambivalence, a similar mix of identification with and distance from, "I, too, sing America."⁵ Moore's and Hughes's "I, too," speaks directly to the literary as practice. Literary writing for them is an act simultaneously of self-assertion and self-construction; an acknowledgment of the division, alienation, and reification of the subject and at the same time an assertion of subjective agency. "Too," set apart and therefore emphasized as it is by commas, puns on "two": I, as split, double, self-alienated as well as nonself-identical, nonetheless assert a relation to poetry and to America, and make a claim on it in my own behalf. Poetry and America are partly other and partly self to Moore and Hughes. Each poem both names the alienation and enacts its antidote. It is within literary writing as practice that self-alienated subjectivity can represent and assert itself, not by means of erasure or transcendence of its ineluctably nonself-identical status, or by means of transcendence of self-alienation, but by means of a discourse within which these modes of self-division become fruitful.

Debates in contemporary literature departments in America around the status of the literary—debates crucial to the cultural studies movement—are oddly detached from such discussions of the current status of the literary as practice. I will summarize these debates before I turn to my own discussion of literary writing as practice of the self. The predominant issues in debates about literature are determined most immediately by the history of struggle between American academic New Criticism and the range of varyingly politically and theoretically oriented paradigms opposing it, most importantly, now, cultural studies. As

a result of this history of struggle, theorists and practitioners of cultural studies generally understand the literary as pertaining to objects of consumption, and the valorization of the literary as a tool of conservative, elitist cultural hegemony, for which literature is the gatekeeper in civilization's self-defense against barbarism.⁶ In place of literary writing, cultural studies valorizes, as exemplary objects of study (and therefore of professional expertise), both various forms of popular or mass culture, and also a broadened, indifferenced category of text, or narrative, or cultural production.⁷

At the same time, however, literary writing as an activity is enjoying great popularity among precisely the nonhegemonic constituencies cultural studies works to help enfranchise by studying their powerful presence in popular culture. Widely acclaimed and successful writers from within those constituencies rely heavily on the literary in their appropriations of cultural capital.⁸ Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize for Literature is the most noteworthy recent instance of this phenomenon.⁹ I hope to examine this disjunction with an eye toward moving beyond the position many contemporary American theorists and practitioners of cultural studies have assumed in relation to the literary, a position which is premised on, and helps to reproduce, a conservative formulation of its cultural significances.

The debate over the status of the literary has, of course, a much vaster and more complex historical context than that of the struggles with the New Criticism around which contemporary American cultural studies has evolved, far too vast and complex to be summarized more than perfunctorily here.¹⁰ It might be simplest and clearest to organize that summary around Raymond Williams's discussion of "literature" in *Keywords*, a discussion that echoes his great work in his other landmark studies, especially *Culture and Society*.¹¹ The theme of his discussion most pertinent to the current debates that concern me is the historical emergence of literature, or what I am calling the literary, as a key cultural component of bourgeois hegemony—of the Enlightenment regime that cultural studies, along with and/or extending various modes of poststructuralist and postmodernist thought, often argues is historically superseded in postmodernism. In these arguments, the literary, like the meritorious bourgeois monad who produces it, is seen as a product of the Enlightenment, coincident with the rise of industrial capitalism and imperialism, and with the general hegemony of the white European male. As Guillory says, "the category of 'literature' names the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie" (CCx).¹² The New Criticism then generally dehistoricized and essentialized (fetishized) this highly historical version of the literary, using it, in the words of Bruce Robbins, to produce "an invented ahistorical constant" that "could be imposed

retrospectively upon centuries of writing to which it is wholly or partially alien."¹³

As Williams shows, with exemplary and characteristic economy and lucidity, "literature" first emerged in English along with the book itself, in the fourteenth-century big bang of the Gutenberg galaxy, signifying more or less the same thing as what we now might have to call "cultural literacy": "a man of **literature**, or of *letters*, meant what we would now describe as a man of wide reading" (K 151; "man" here as universal signifier seems apt). In fact, some versions of cultural studies' resistance to the valorization of literature connect to the argument that not merely the Enlightenment but the *longue-durée* age of the book itself is over. As Williams argues, "the general sense of 'polite learning,' firmly attached to the idea of printed books, was laying the basis for the later specialization" of the term "literature" (K 151). This specialization emerged, again, with Enlightenment capitalism in the eighteenth century, attached locally in Britain to the "heightened self-consciousness of the profession of authorship, in the period of transition from patronage to the bookselling market" (K 152). The further specialization of "literature" to its modern signification of "creative" or "imaginative" writing was largely brought about, at once within the Enlightenment regime and also as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism and instrumentalism, by Romanticism, with its supreme investment in the "unique," transformative, creative, imaginative, transcendent powers of the extraordinary—literally, above the ordinary—individual.

Most relevant to the class analysis so constitutive of cultural studies' relation to the literary is the further specialization of "literature" along the evaluative axis deployed now by conservative defenders of high culture in order to exclude popular forms from the category of the literary: "At the same time many, even most poems and plays and novels are not seen as **literature**; they fall below its level, in a sense related to the old distinction of *polite learning*; they are not 'substantial' or 'important' enough to be **works of literature**. A new category of **popular literature** or the **sub-literary** has then to be instituted, to describe works which may be *fiction* but which are not *imaginative* or *creative*, which are therefore devoid of AESTHETIC (q.v.) interest, and which are not ART (q.v.)" (K 153).¹⁴ A great deal of the cultural studies practiced in literature departments¹⁵ is devoted to analysis of works in this popular "sub-literary" category. Again, the literary, redefined as promulgator of hegemonic ideology, is opposed to the popular within this cultural studies practice, and is conflated with high-cultural, exclusionary standards of literary merit derived by New Criticism from the complex, difficult, resistant, often avowedly elitist works of literary modernism.

Some of the problems inherent in this stance in relation to the literary

(from what we now would loosely call a progressive political point of view) are implicit in the very Romantic articulation of “literature” from which the New Critical elevation of the literary derives. For the Romantics, as for the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century avant-gardes and for many of the modernists, literature was an oppositional, antibourgeois, anticapitalist, egalitarian practice, a practice of “freedom,” to use Sartre’s term,¹⁶ by means of which both writers and readers might be empowered to resist hegemonic bourgeois ideologies and the multifarious alienations of life under capitalism.¹⁷ It is in this sense of the literary, as part of “autonomous”¹⁸ artistic practice in general, that informs the promodernist work of the Frankfurt School, most notably of Marcuse and Adorno. In the American academic context, as Bruce Robbins argues in *Secular Vocations*: “The vision of a pre-capitalist world embodied in the New Critical version of the poetic text . . . is an indispensable part of the New Criticism’s argument to society-at-large about why it deserves its hegemony, and about why the profession where it claims that hegemony deserves to exist at all. In the New Critical narrative, the narrowing of literature as autonomous professional object is simultaneously the clearing of an exemplary oppositional space, a kind of anti-capitalist microcosm, which criticism sets itself the task of propagating.”¹⁹

Cultural studies’ conception of the literary frequently depends, as has been implicit throughout this discussion, on a conflation of the literary itself with the dehistoricized, utterly decontextualized literary object of New Critical reification: what I have described elsewhere, in arguing for the legitimacy of political readings of modernism as critique of twentieth-century culture, as “the altar of linguistic and intellectual complexity in search of transcendent formal unity.”²⁰ It is precisely a *re*-historicized view of the cultural significances of the literary that I am arguing for here. Understanding literature as fully historically contingent—emerging in its general modern form in the Enlightenment and through Romanticism—is not incompatible with understanding the literary as a distinct contemporary discourse which needs to be differentiated from other modes of textuality, narrative, or cultural production. The modern literary did not congeal either at its moment of emergence or within its New Critical apotheosis, but has continued to evolve, through the later nineteenth century, modernism, and into postmodernism. The fact that a formation is historically contingent (which of course all social-cultural formations are) does not vitiate its capacity for transformative cultural and political uses, even when a denial of its own historicity has become encoded within some of its self-articulations. The claims for oppositionality made on behalf of the literary by many of its practitioners, by a range of modernist and poststructuralist theorists, and even, as

Robbins argues, by the New Critics, may have relevance despite the dehistoricization and conservative appropriations of “literature” upon which those claims are often founded.²¹

I am aware that I have been using the term “the literary” without defining it (except impressionistically in my opening remarks), thereby tacitly endorsing the definition Williams gives, which continues to be the dominant or consensual (“commonsense” and therefore ideological) meaning of the term: “well-written books of an *imaginative* or *creative* kind” (K 152). I have been postponing any alternative acts of definition in order to use them to discuss what I take to be the oppositionality of some deployments of the literary in the contemporary American conjuncture. Again, this argument on behalf of the literary is not in any way intended to argue against or undermine the study of textuality, narrative, cultural production, and the popular with which cultural studies is identified. It is certainly not intended—quite the contrary—to argue for the preservation of the elitist high-cultural domain staked out for and defended by Great Literature. It is intended rather to reconfigure the literary within cultural studies: to argue that the study of text, narrative, cultural production, popular culture, and the study of the literary understood as a meaningfully distinct discourse and practice, need not be mutually exclusive, or even incompatible. “Literature” does not, as cultural studies sometimes assumes, adhere primarily to the high-culture side of a high culture/popular culture binary except within conservative ideologies.²² Further, since, in Guillory’s words, “it is not yet clear whether a ‘cultural studies’ curriculum has been conceived which does not replicate the theoretical and hermeneutic paradigms of literary interpretation” (CC 265), cultural studies disenfranchises the literary at the expense of repressing its own conditions of existence.

I have in mind a range of complementary or compatible versions of the literary developed by the contemporary American writers I am interested in themselves, and also by poststructuralist theorists. First of all, I am not interested in establishing, as for example the Russian Formalists attempted to do, some transhistorical essence of literariness. I am interested rather in understanding some functions of the literary in contemporary culture (obviously, again, the impossibility of establishing an essence of literariness does not preclude the possibility that the literary has meaningful existence as a discourse; discourses are preeminently historical).

I will begin with Roland Barthes, whose *Mythologies* is often read as a founding and exemplary text of cultural studies.²³ Antony Easthope argues that *Mythologies* effectively destroys the category of the literary by applying standard New Critical methods of reading literature (what he calls “modernist reading”), where every aspect of the text has signifi-

cance, to a potentially limitless range of cultural productions, most of them in the domain of popular culture. (Easthope's argument depends, again, on the conflation of the literary as a category with the exemplary literary text of New Criticism, which determines aesthetic value, attaches it to high culture, and assumes a fundamental aesthetic unity.) It is certainly true that the tendency of *Mythologies* is to indifferently categorize categories of cultural production. However, the fact that all cultural productions share characteristics with literary texts and can be analyzed using methods developed for studying literary texts does not mean that there are no meaningful differences between literary and nonliterary texts. Further, *Mythologies* does not, except incidentally, represent Barthes writing directly about the literary (several pieces discuss deployments of bourgeois literary discourse, or "mythology," but Barthes is not theorizing the literary in this book).

Mythologies teaches us how to read the determinate signs of late capitalist culture. In "Kafka's Answer," and other pieces collected in *Critical Essays*, written right around the same time that *Mythologies* appeared, Barthes thinks about indeterminacy, which he locates in the difference of the literary, of literary signification as difference:²⁴ "the world [in literature] is a place endlessly open to signification but endlessly dissatisfied by it. . . . literature is no more than an interrogation of the world . . . it is because signs are uncertain that there is a literature. Kafka's technique says that the world's meaning is unutterable, that the artist's only task is to explore possible significations . . . [Barthes posits] the essentially interrogative function of literature . . . it is because the world is not finished that literature is possible."²⁵ While these meditations connect clearly to Barthes's allegiance to avant-garde or modernist literary praxis—the literature of multiplicity and indeterminacy (see, for example, *S/Z, The Pleasure of the Text*, "From Work to Text"), I would argue they also point toward a more general sense of the literary in the twentieth century as a locus of the *activity* of unanswering interrogation: Barthes's emphasis falls more heavily on acts of writing than on acts of reading. The "writerly" text Barthes defines in *S/Z* is precisely the text that converts reading, which Barthes dismisses in relation to the "readerly" text as the passive consumption of bourgeois hegemony, into, or allows it to participate in, the activity of writing. Literary writing is the act of continually asking what the world means without answering.²⁶

Suspending for a moment my emphasis on literature as activity, the notion of literary writing as constituted by unanswered questions, or unresolved tensions, has become a contemporary commonplace, applicable both to high as opposed to middlebrow or popular literature, and also simply to "literature" itself. For example, in criticizing F. Lee Bailey's opportunistic use of the word "nigger" in his attack on Mark Fuhrman in

the O. J. Simpson trial, Frank Rich, on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, contrasts Bailey's discourse to Twain's in *Huckleberry Finn*—"F. Lee Bailey's manipulative use of 'nigger' is far different from Twain's and far less interesting": "What makes this 1884 book eternally a hot potato—and in part what also makes it great—is that it wades right into the American racial divide, forcing readers to wrestle with the ever-changing ambiguities of Huck's (and Twain's) relationship to Jim, the runaway slave, from first page to last. Precisely because 'Huckleberry Finn' is literature, not a civics tract, it raises thorny questions about race instead of resolving them."²⁷

Beyond this notion of the literary as site of open-ended, unanswered interrogation, or unresolved contradiction (Rich's "unresolved questions" conflates the two formulations), the *activity* of writing, as is implicit again in Barthes's distinction between the writerly and the readerly, is conceived as a mode of resistance to the construction of subjectivity in late or consumer capitalism around acts of consumption. In placing primary emphasis on the study of the popular experience of popular culture within consumer capitalism, cultural studies generally focuses on consumption rather than production, since the movies, television shows, advertising, videos, and popular music that are common objects of study usually require heavy concentrations of capital to produce and distribute. Cultural studies thereby tacitly reinforces the hegemonic construction of subjectivity in consumer capitalism, even while focusing on sites of resistance or activities of refunctioning within that construction.

Although getting published, publicized, distributed, and widely read—becoming a best-seller—is another story, or rather the same story as that of popular movies, television, videos, and advertising, anyone can write. Writing as activity requires no technology, no capital (despite the proliferation of personal computers, they are not *necessary* to writing) yet it still commands a significant amount of cultural capital. One of the best articulations I know of the progressive political significance of literary writing in contemporary America appears in Grace Paley's story "The Expensive Moment," in her third collection *Later the Same Day*, a story about "cultural exchange" between America and China: "But the evening belonged to the Chinese artists and writers. . . . All sorts of American cultural workers were invited. Some laughed to hear themselves described in this way. They were accustomed to being called 'dreamer poet realist postmodernist.' They might have liked being called 'cultural dreamer,' but no one had thought of that yet."²⁸ Our literary writers, Paley pungently, deftly shows, are inadequately named by both literary critics and leftist cultural analysts; we need a new name

that acknowledges the particular kind of progressive political work done by literary writing, and by aesthetic practice in general.

Evidently this view of cultural dreaming—of the literary (and more generally the aesthetic, though that is not my direct concern in this argument) as a meaningfully distinct discourse—has nothing to do with organic unity, or with elite civilization fending off popular barbarism by means of literary merit guaranteeing high culture. It has much more in common with Cary Nelson's project, in *Repression and Recovery*, of *expanding* the category of the literary to include popular American political writing (primarily poetry and song lyrics) of the first half of the twentieth century, writing that considered itself literary but was legislated and erased as "sub-literary" through the process Williams outlines in *Keywords*.²⁹ This hybridity of "high" or "elite" with middlebrow and popular literature is, as I have argued elsewhere and others have also argued, the most salient characteristic of postmodern writing.³⁰ It is not merely that literary class distinctions have broken down or blurred, but that postmodern works enact and are defined by this hybridity. The works I will argue most vividly represent nonhegemonic deployments of the literary as practice are best-sellers, with Toni Morrison's work again standing as exemplary and characteristic.

Ian Hunter, in "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," makes an important argument, compatible with Barthes and in the spirit of Paley, that the aesthetic, and particularly the literary, has emerged in modern Western culture as a "practice of the self."³¹ Hunter's argument, like Barthes's notion of the "writerly text," extends the interrogative function of the literary from the activity of the writer to the activity of the reader practicing "aesthetic criticism." He differentiates aesthetic criticism from "philology," considering the latter a form of knowledge and the former an act of self-interrogation and self-construction:

Philology is a knowledge not because it is somehow infallibly in touch with literary facts but simply because it employs techniques of description, evidential accumulation, and confirmation that brings its objects into the sphere of the true and the false. In short, it deploys what Foucault calls "techniques of veridiction" and constitutes a particular "regime of truth." Aesthetic criticism on the other hand does not employ such techniques, except incidentally, and forms a different kind of domain. . . . [Aesthetic criticism is] a practice of self-problematization and self-modification in which literature functions as a device—an object for a practice of contemplation targeted on the self. . . . It is not that literature is open-ended but that we open its ends, subjecting it to permanent aesthetic surgery as a means of operating on ourselves. (ACS 364–65)³²

Hunter's argument concerning aesthetic reading applies even more powerfully to literary writing. Writing literature has been viewed loosely throughout modernity as a practice of the self (even if negatively—the erasure of the self—as in some modernism), and this view has never been more apt than it is now, in light of widespread contemporary practices of autobiographical and poetic writing: poetry, particularly poetry written in the lyrical voice of the “I,” remains, as it was for Hughes and Moore, the traditional literary genre most closely linked to notions of direct expression of acts of subjective self-construction, or “practices of the self.”³³

Perhaps the most extensive and profoundly suggestive poststructuralist meditations on the literary have been undertaken by Derrida, and my argument here, particularly in its emphasis on literature as activity, has been most materially influenced by Derek Attridge's anthology of Derrida's work on the literary, *Acts of Literature*.³⁴ It would be impossible to summarize Derrida's work within an essay such as this; it seems to me most useful to quote one characteristic, suggestive, but by no means definitive moment of discussion from Attridge's interview with Derrida, entitled “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” as a way of gesturing toward some of the dimensions of Derrida's articulations of the literary most relevant to my concerns here:

literature seemed to me [in his youth] . . . to be the institution which allows one to *say everything*, [Translator's Note: *Tout dire*, both to “say everything,” with a sense of exhausting a totality, and to “say anything,” i.e. to speak without constraints on what one may say] in *every way*. The space of literature is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything. . . . It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution. . . . The institution of literature in the West, in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy. (36–37; emphases in the original)

“The institution of literature in the West”: as Attridge explains in his introduction, “What Derrida emphasizes is that literature is an *institution*” (23). Derrida's sense of literature as a modern historical formation is very close to Williams's, hence his valorizations of the literary are not founded on ahistorical, essentializing definitions of inherent literariness, or on arguments for high-cultural literary merit. He is always at pains to stress the historically contingent status of the literary. As Attridge argues:

[literature] is not given in nature or the brain but brought into being by processes that are social, legal, and political, and that can be mapped historically

and geographically. . . . It is worth stressing this point, lest the attention which Derrida gives to literature seem to indicate a perpetual, ahistorical, privileging. That a body of texts called "literary" can, at a certain historical conjuncture, serve strategic purposes is not the result of any transcendent properties these texts possess, any permanent access to truth. Rather, it is an opportunity that can be seized. (23)

I am interested here in the ways in which contemporary writers from nonhegemonic groups have seized the opportunity afforded by this anti-institutional institution of the literary, this practice of the self and unanswered interrogation of the world; how they (we) have used this "authorization to say everything" in literary acts that "call forth a democracy in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy." Cheryl A. Wall has identified precisely "the dual quests for freedom and for beauty," the "perfect fus[ion]" of "ideology and aesthetics," as both the ideal and the defining characteristic of African American literary writing, the analysis of which has been the object of "much of the work in African American literary study over the last quarter century."³⁵

This appropriation of the literary is evident as well in autobiographical writing by women across a wide spectrum of racial, ethnic, class, and sexual positionalities. The upgrading of autobiography, a previously marginalized genre, into literary legitimacy is itself a more general form of this nonhegemonic appropriation of the literary. Writing of a literary kind is also at the center of a number of highly influential feminist agendas, of which *écriture féminine* as a general phenomenon is one of the most notable. Hélène Cixous's "Sorties," an exemplary manifesto of *écriture féminine*, invokes for writing this sort of empowerment of the disempowered:³⁶

I will say: today, writing is woman's. That is not a provocation, it means that woman admits there is an other. . . . Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me—the other that I am and am not . . . a feminine one, a masculine one, some?—several, some unknown, which is indeed what gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars. . . . Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same *and of other* . . . not knowing one another and beginning again only from what is most distant, from self, from other, from the other within.³⁷

It has been necessary to my argument so far to disaggregate the literary from its conservative uses as a high-cultural gatekeeper and preserve of hegemonic cultural capital, but it has also been implicit in my argument from the beginning that one of the uses of the literary now

by nonhegemonic groups as empowerment and authorization depends on appropriations of precisely that cultural capital, which is different from that made available through access to popular culture. In an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* of May 26, 1994 entitled "Books On Top," the novelist E. Annie Proulx makes a version of this argument, albeit from within a fairly conservative cultural gatekeeping position, generally contemptuous of popular culture (opposing "serious books" to "best-sellers") and of cybertext: "Books once rather scornfully considered grist for the small publisher's mill are catching the reading public's interest. Among the new books published last year were important works of fiction from Arab-Americans, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Caribbean-Americans, Native Americans and others. The so-called gay and lesbian novel is beginning to escape the genre closet and *stand on bookstore shelves alongside traditional works*" (emphasis added).³⁸ All these hyphenated and closeted Americans can now take their rightful place "alongside traditional [read race-ethnicity-class-gender-sexuality hegemonic, canonical] works" on the great bookstore shelves of consumer democracy. Of course it may be the case that nonhegemonic groups have access to and acclaim within the literary now precisely because its cultural capital is so drastically diminished, as the necessity for an op-ed piece such as this implies.³⁹ But I don't like the glib defeatism of that argument, and it strikes me as at best perhaps only a partially adequate account of this phenomenon.

This op-ed piece might also seem to be a perfect demonstration of John Beverley's argument that the literary functions as hegemonic "incorporation and neutralization of contradiction": that "[i]n something that is so obviously connected via the education system to the state and to the formation of elites, there is always the danger that even the most iconoclastic or 'progressive' literature is simply forging the new forms of hegemony."⁴⁰ But I would argue that the impact of this substantial a body of nonhegemonic writing also puts material pressure on the dominant literary discourse. This writing is not merely sucked up into and digested ("recontained") by a reconfigured but essentially unchallenged, perhaps even strengthened, hegemony. If that were the case, the "culture wars" would be unnecessary, and certainly nowhere near as virulent as they are—they are virulent and persistent because they reflect real struggle. Also, the writers I have in mind here do not surrender their difference in order to enter mainstream literary culture, as does Richard (formerly Ricardo) Rodriguez in Beverley's parable of ineluctable cooptation and triumphant hegemony. Quite the contrary, they (we) use the literary to assert, explore, and enact the dilemmas of, their (our) difference.

In "Sorties," Hélène Cixous talks about writing as the empowerment

of a self-alienated subjectivity, the means by which s/he can forge, represent, enact a “passageway” between the self and the other within the self: “Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me—the other that I am and am not.”⁴¹ I would argue that the literary is such an important arena of empowerment for nonhegemonic subjectivities now precisely because of the way in which it enables the objectified, self-alienated, instrumentalized, reified subject to assume agency in relation to her/his own objectification (self-alienation, instrumentalization, reification). Alice Walker uses the title of Rebecca Cox Jackson’s *Gifts of Power* to discuss Jackson’s life/work as a paradigm for “naming our own experience after our own fashion (as well as rejecting whatever does not seem to suit).”⁴² As Donna Haraway says in her “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” perhaps the most frequently quoted and widely anthologized work of leftist American postmodern feminist theory: “Writing has a special significance for all colonized groups. . . . Contests for the meanings of writing are a major form of contemporary political struggle. Releasing the play of writing is deadly serious. The poetry and stories of U.S. women of color are repeatedly about writing, about access to power to signify . . . on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.”⁴³ One of these “women of color,” poet Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes this tool-seizing and world-marking clearly and powerfully in her “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” in language very similar to that of Héléne Cixous. I will quote her at length:

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. . . . The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think as “other”—the dark, the feminine. Didn’t we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered “normal,” white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. . . . The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive.⁴⁴

A number of successful, widely-read, cultural-capital-rich contemporary American literary texts by nonhegemonic writers, generally the

texts onto which I have cathected most deeply, are organized around parables of this self-empowerment.⁴⁵ The greatest and clearest is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the reified, objectified, instrumentalized subjectivity of the African American slave is retrieved and rewritten, if not redeemed or transcended, by and for an active storytelling and naming subjective agency. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* is organized around the same parable of empowered naming and storytelling subjectivity, as are (to name just a few, as the saying goes, and in no particular order) Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, many or most of the stories by Grace Paley, the essays and fiction of Alice Walker, the essays and poetry of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, the rest of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Wesley Brown's *Darktown Strutters*, Jonathan Strong's *Secret Words*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, which ends as follows:⁴⁶

Then I saw the book Mariah had given me. It was on the night table next to my bed. Beside it lay my fountain pen full of beautiful blue ink. I picked up both, and I opened the book. At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. At the sight of it, many thoughts rushed through me, but I could write down only this: "I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it." And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur.⁴⁷

Mariah is the white woman for whom Lucy had worked as an au pair, and with whom she had formed an ambiguous friendship. The contradictions of Lucy's relation to writing as self-authorization are apparent in the fact that this enabling book had been Mariah's gift. Lucy is able to write her full name at the top of the page, to claim and represent her own subjectivity, but the implications of wholeness and self-presence in that act of claiming dissolve immediately in her inability to write down any of the "many thoughts" that "rush through [her]"—itself an alienated formulation—except for her self-annihilating desire to die from loving. This moment is very similar to Morrison's theme of death by (self-)loving, and to her repeated motif in the closing section of *Beloved*, "It was not a story to pass on," twice, and then "This is not a story to pass on."⁴⁸ Lucy's writing then acts on her, causing her to feel "a great wave of shame": a recognition or an acknowledgment of her alienation from herself, become visible to her by means of her own writing. The tears that shame produces, however, then make illegible the writing that produced the shame: the oscillating doubleness ("passageway," in Cixous's

term) of reified and reclaimed subjectivity is not resolved, but writing becomes the self-constituting act by means of which this subjectivity can encounter, speak, and transform itself-in/and-the-world: "I, too, dislike it"; "I, too, sing America."

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NOTES

- 1 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, 1993), p. 265; hereafter cited in text as *CC*.
- 2 Stephanie Girard's doctoral dissertation in progress, "Packaging the Present/Generating a Genre: Vintage Contemporaries 1984," has provided an important inspiration for my efforts to think about the literary in the joint contexts of cultural studies and contemporary American culture.
- 3 See Bruce Robbins, "Literature, Localism, and Love," *Surface*, 4, no. 3 (1994), 1-14, for a critique of the problems and contradictions in various recent advocacies of such a return or retrenchment. I am indebted to Bruce Robbins for his helpful response to an earlier version of this essay.
- 4 In her unpublished working paper, "The Witness of Poetry," Harriet Davidson discusses the wide proliferation of poetry writing among her own students, including those who say they do not read or even like poetry, and throughout the American populace in general: "never, I would like to argue, have so many people written poetry" (p. 10).
- 5 Marianne Moore, "Poetry," *Collected Poems* (New York, 1935); Langston Hughes, "I, Too," *Selected Poems* (New York, 1926).
- 6 In articulating this position, cultural studies theorists are not beating any dead Arnoldian horse. Promulgators of the conservative position are vocal, numerous, and well funded. One need only think of the right's heroes of the culture wars, such as William Bennett, Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, and E. D. Hirsch.
- 7 Exemplary in articulating this position are John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis, 1993), and Antony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London, 1991). It seems to me that film studies occupies an ambiguous position within this shift from, as Easthope puts it, literary into cultural studies, because of its (at least) dual emphases on the aesthetic practices of filmmakers and on the position of film within (particularly popular and mass) culture.
- 8 The phrase "cultural capital" is taken, of course, from the crucial work of Pierre Bourdieu, and refers as well to John Guillory's uses and extensions of Bourdieu in *Cultural Capital*. Guillory's work has particular relevance to my argument here, as will be apparent.
- 9 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, 1988), argues that what she calls "minoritarian and ex-centric" writing is characteristically postmodern.
- 10 See esp. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, chs. 2-4.
- 11 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976); hereafter cited in text as *K*.
- 12 See also Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993).
- 13 Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London, 1993), p. 69; Robbins calls this retrospective imposition a "scandal" (p. 69).
- 14 Pierre Bourdieu's comparable arguments, in his landmark work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), have been

extremely influential. His concept of “cultural capital,” by means of which he can name and evaluate the power of works of art within bourgeois hegemony, is, again, crucial to my argument here.

15 I use that term not only because it is still what we most commonly call the academic administrative units within which we work, but also to indicate the extent to which its persistence marks something alive in what we do rather than just an institutional anachronism, a residual professional formation, or the continuing hegemony of the New Criticism.

16 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1965).

17 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981). Jameson argues that “modernism is itself an ideological expression of capitalism, and in particular, of the latter’s reification of daily life. . . . Yet modernism can at one and the same time be read as a Utopian compensation for everything reification brings with it” (p. 236).

18 The quotation marks here indicate that I am using this term as Adorno, and not the New Critics, use it, to indicate oppositionality to bourgeois hegemony, not radical disconnection from all contextualization.

19 Robbins, *Secular Vocations*, p. 78. Robbins otherwise endorses cultural studies’ demotion of the literary; see particularly pp. 68–70.

20 Marianne DeKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton, 1991), p. 12.

21 For John Beverley, the oppositionality of the literary which drew him to the profession (the Beats and the literary 60s) was a false god, discredited by the revelation of literature’s complicity in maintaining hegemony by venting and recontaining potential opposition. See particularly ch. 2, “The Formation of the Ideology of the Literary (from Garcilaso to Greenblatt),” in *Against Literature*, pp. 25–46.

22 Adorno and Horkheimer’s formulation of the “culture industry,” of course, is an important exception to that generalization, though they endorse not tradition-guarding high culture but something quite different, namely avant-garde practice, as the antidote to the degradation of mass culture under consumer capitalism. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (1944; rpt. New York, 1990), pp. 120–67. I would also note here that many theorists of the postmodern argue that it is precisely in contemporary literature, and aesthetic practice in general, that the “great divide” between elite and mass culture dissolves. See particularly Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986).

23 See Easthope, *Literary Into Cultural Studies*: “Two books initiate modern cultural studies—*Culture and Society* by Raymond Williams, published in 1958, and *Mythologies* written by Roland Barthes in the early 1950s and published in 1957” (p. 140). See also Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979; rpt. London, 1988): “Barthes’ application [in *Mythologies*] of a method rooted in linguistics to other systems of discourse outside language (fashion, film, food, etc.) opened up completely new possibilities for contemporary cultural studies” (p. 10).

24 For an extended treatment of the notion of literary writing as locus of difference, see Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988).

25 Roland Barthes, “Kafka’s Answer,” in *Critical Essays*, tr. Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill., 1972), p. 137.

26 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. Richard Miller (New York, 1974): “Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (p. 4). Note Barthes’s indebtedness to

Sartre here. I emphasize the issue of unanswered interrogation because it differentiates literary writing most materially from nonliterary writing such as this, which, though it might edge toward various other literary freedoms, still has the primary purpose of making arguments and therefore of proposing determinate answers to the questions it raises. That primary purpose has a pervasive effect on the shape and texture of the writing, inextricable from the impact of the whole array of conventions (shifting but powerfully enforced) of critical style.

27 Frank Rich, "Dropping the N-Bomb," *The New York Times*, 16 March 1995, A25.

28 Grace Paley, "The Expensive Moment," in *Later the Same Day* (New York, 1985), p. 189. The suggestive power of Paley's phrase, "cultural dreamer," which I evidently find at the heart of my concerns here given my use of it in the essay's title, raises the enormous question of the position of psychoanalysis and the unconscious within the field of inquiry mapped out by a juxtaposition of the literary with cultural studies (I also love the way it echoes "Beautiful Dreamer"). I cannot begin to do justice to the ramifications of this question here. I can only stipulate the truisms that the unconscious is profoundly implicated in artistic practice, that psychoanalysis, particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis, has been crucial to our understanding of divided or split or self-alienated subjectivity, that much twentieth-century artistic practice is derived from or coincident with psychoanalytic insight into dream structure, and that both dreamwork and psychoanalysis are, or can be, practices of the self very similar to the activity of literary writing as I am articulating it here (the clearest instance of this contiguity would be Anne Sexton).

29 Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison, Wis., 1989).

30 This argument is informed most importantly by Hutcheon, *Poetics*, and Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*. I have made versions of this argument in "Longshot: Detective Fiction as Postmodernism," *LIT*, 4, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 185-94, and in "Utopia Limited: Post-Sixties and Postmodern American Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41, no. 2 (Spring 1995), 75-97.

31 Ian Hunter, "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York, 1992), p. 363; hereafter cited in text as ACS. Again, I would note here the connection to psychoanalysis as a "practice of the self."

32 This argument is highly reminiscent of, and indebted to, the Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag of the 60s.

33 Harriet Davidson's work on "The Witness of Poetry" is particularly relevant here.

34 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York, 1992); hereafter cited in text. Derek Attridge's introduction, "Derrida and the Questioning of Literature" (pp. 1-29), is especially useful.

35 Cheryl A. Wall, "On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: Debating Aesthetics and/as Ideology in African American Literature," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, N.J., 1994), pp. 283-303; these quotations appear on pp. 7 and 29 of a manuscript version of this essay.

36 "Writing" has the same force here, I would argue, as "the literary." Like Barthes and Derrida, the advocates and practitioners of *écriture féminine* are primarily interested in avant-garde modes of literary writing, and use the term "*écriture*" to designate those modes. I would also note here *écriture féminine's* close connection to and rootedness in psychoanalytically-informed analyses of language and/in culture.

37 Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, tr. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1986), pp. 85-86. Cixous has been a prime target of the repudiation of French feminism and *écriture féminine* by academic (post)feminists because of its essentialism. As this passage makes clear, essentialism is far from thoroughgoing or consistent in Cixous's work.

- 38 E. Annie Proulx, "Books on Top," *The New York Times*, 26 May 1994, A23.
- 39 Guillory defines the "historical crisis of literature" as "the long-term decline in the cultural capital of literature," *Cultural Capital*, p. x.
- 40 Beverley, *Against Literature*, pp. 25, xiv.
- 41 Cixous, multiply other as are many of these writers, is a Jew who grew up in Algeria.
- 42 Alice Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York, 1983), p. 82.
- 43 Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review*, 15, no. 80 (1985), 93–94; rpt. in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York, 1990), p. 217; also rpt. in Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), p. 175.
- 44 Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Mass., 1981), pp. 168–69. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano discusses Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* in very similar terms: "Mestiza consciousness is not a given but must be *produced*, or 'built'. . . . It is spatialized . . . racialized ('mestiza'), and presented as a new mythology, a new culture, a nondualistic perception and practice. . . . In *Borderlands*, this new consciousness is created through *writing*; Anzaldúa's project is one of discursive self-formation" (emphases as in original). Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera*: Cultural Studies, 'Difference,' and the Non-Unitary Subject," *Cultural Critique*, 28 (Fall 1994), 13.
- 45 I may appear to be using literary texts by black women and other women of color to "flesh out" white theory, literally to be the body for the white mind, the concrete example of white abstraction, a practice dissected brilliantly by Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other,'" in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989), pp. 38–57, and by Margaret Homans, "Women of Color Writers and Feminist Theory," *New Literary History*, 25 (1994), 73–94. However, these are in fact the contemporary American literary texts I care about most, and which, in addition to my own literary writing, motivated this essay. The white male theory that gets so much attention here has in fact set the terms of the debate over the literary within cultural studies. The question of where the exemplary literary texts appear in the essay, when this placement is governed by the overall structure of argument rather than by an unconscious deployment of racist critical practice, strikes me as of little material significance.
- 46 This of course has no claim or desire to be an exhaustive list; in fact, its nonexhaustiveness, its partiality, marks it clearly as "subjective."
- 47 Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York, 1990), pp. 163–64.
- 48 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987), pp. 274–75. Note the pun of "pass on," which can mean, diametrically oppositely, either transmit or walk away from.