

Michael Moon and Cathy N. Davidson, eds. *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from "Oroonoko" to Anita Hill*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995. Pp. vi, 529. \$49.95; \$17.95 pb.

Topically-organized essay collections assembled under the sign of theoretical revisioning frequently disappoint. All too often they splinter into fragments on first perusal, and the reader is fortunate to recover one or two brilliant shards. Such is certainly not the case with *Subjects and Citizens*, a substantial book whose coherence, in methodology and comprehensiveness, derives from the fact that all but three of its twenty essays were recently published in the journal *American Literature*. Moon and Davidson aim at a radical decentring of canonical "American Literature" within a series of interlocking frames: ideologies of Nation, gender, and race. Most of the essays mobilize a sharp sense of historical specificity for projects of reconfiguring women, whiteness, slave subjectivity, the mulatto, and the Jew within the conflictual narratives of American national formation. For the purposes of this collection, the mediated oral account of a Sauk war chief signifies as richly as does Kate Chopin's thickly literary novel *The Awakening*. The texts of major figures like Cooper, Douglass, Jacobs, Poe, Melville, Stowe, Twain, Faulkner, and Toni Morrison, as they articulate against the crucial antebellum and reconstruction periods, define specific political investments and urgencies. The essayists probe what is at stake in recurring *topoi* and figures; consequently, American texts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Innocents Abroad* move out from the homogenized and continuous saga of memorial literary history to reveal how domesticity, education, abolition, Native Americans, the mulatta/o, and the chicano/a are figured in the eloquent contestations of the nineteenth century. *Subjects and Citizens*, furthermore, demonstrates the continuing grip of the present. To *re*historicize is, indeed, to confront the impossibility and the irresponsibility of dreams of a literary escape from History.

In fact, as William Wells Brown discovered when he visited a memorial to soldiers who fell in the Revolutionary War, American history has continuously "colonized off" (175) whole groups of its population, constituting some as citizens while leaving others as subjects in quest of subjectivity. For Russ Castronovo ("Radical Configurations of History"), Melville's story "The Bell-Tower" contests the unitary, monumentalist history that achieves consolidation by referring itself back to a founding republican moment, and bracketing the degraded present, as if that founding moment itself were not "already riddled with irony and inconsistency" (170). While Castronovo uses Melville's story to open a space for ideological interrogation, Annette Kolodny ("Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions") critiques monumentalism more generally. She advocates refiguring the "frontier" as a host of "permeable margins" (10), as fluid zones of contact between different ethni-

cities, voices, and languages. Such margins would derigidify contact sites, both chronologically and geographically, and unsettle originary quests so seductive to historians. Her proposal for a new literary history would enable consideration of the writings of Chinese railroad workers, precolonial frontier processes, and immigrant literatures, alongside Columbus's "Letter to Lord Sanchez . . ." and the Yaqui "Testamento." Such a "history," to which *Subjects and Citizens* might serve as a kind of prolegomenon, would certainly not be marked by a monumentalism which, in Barbara Ladd's words (in her searching interrogation of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*), bespeaks an America "obsessed with its own historical uniqueness" (367).

Recent strongly-historicized critiques have generated resistance to canonical monumentalism out of slave narrativity, so it is not surprising to find a particularly strong and interconnected group of essays dealing with intricacies of race and gender. Stephanie Athey and Daniel Cooper Alarcon ("*Oroonoko's* Gendered Economies of Honor/Horror") acknowledge a debt to the postcolonialist work of Peter Hulme and the British materialist school on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but find that its elision of black males and white females needs to be challenged. In their painstaking analysis of Aphra Behn's novel, they untangle a complex racial and gendered economy, showing how the female narrator is able to establish powerful agency by constructing her white body as a metaphysical entity, beyond value. Writing about "Antebellum Projects of Resistance," Maggie Sale, too, insists upon attention to race and gender together. Gender made a huge difference for black abolitionists, in their painful interventions into cultural space defined in terms of Anglo-Saxon masculinity. Sale shows how Frederick Douglass deployed the individual rights ideology and rhetoric of the Revolutionary period, while Frances Watkins Harper and Harriet Jacobs added a Christian discourse of *natural* rights, in advancing the abolitionist cause; such an addition was, Sale demonstrates, motivated by gender. Nancy Bentley ("White Slaves"), in a "gender/genre" study, differentiates between the defiant male mulatto (like Douglass, whose bodily suffering seems unrepresentable) who must become either fully black and extinguishable or effectively rebellious, and the female mulatta, whose suffering can be marked on her body, because her body's degradation gets transformed into spiritual capital. But Maurice Wallace's essay on "Constructing the Black Masculine" puts the issue of race and gender to yet more ambitious tests, in arguing the implications of the unavailability of Freudian Oedipalism to unfathered black subjects. For him, at least part of the project of autobiographical writers like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington was to find their way out of a feminized closet and stake claims to normative masculinity. Wallace's careful analysis of key episodes and scenarios in the autobiographical writing (particularly of the Douglass episode of Aunt Hester's violation) presents

the passage between preliminal and liminal phases in the black male as intensely fraught and provisional. I do, however, find something chillingly essentialist in Wallace's registration of "persistent, visceral impulses lurking beneath the black subject's ego" (246), particularly given the emphasis of these essays on African-Americans' strategic mobilization of discourses in constructing and re-constructing "identity."

Three essays carry considerable weight in their searching examinations of canonical writers. Joan Dayan, in "Amorous Bondage," brings Poe's "racialized gothic" (137) under sharp focus. Examining the twinned discourses of gender and race in the antebellum south, and deploring critics' refusal to acknowledge his complicity in the race/slavery discourse of his time, Dayan insists that it is Poe's acute insights into the white southern construction of *both* owner-slave relations and female gentility that inform his tales of ghostly return, horror, and decomposition. It is perhaps Poe's complicity that enabled him to deconstruct myths of natural subservience, as his "[f]ictions of sentiment and idealizations of love . . . [become] linked in unsettling ways to the social realities of property and possession" (122). Poe's gothicization of the creolized southern belle finds its counterpart in Kate Chopin's privileged romancing of the (Europeanized) creole and mulatta. Michele A. Birnbaum reads *The Awakening* not in existentialist terms, but shows how Edna Pontellier's quest for identity beyond culture depends precisely on prior categories of race and class. Birnbaum makes it more difficult to enlist texts from culturally-inflected domains of privilege for feminist-liberatory narratives; her essay provides a model for work still to be done on intersections of class, race and gender in American literatures. Finally, in this group, Sander L. Gilman takes on "Mark Twain and the Diseases of the Jews." In *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain chronicles his cruise-trip of 1868, a journey that became a progressive immersion into a religious, exotic, and inherently diseased world. Suffering intestinal disorders in Damascus, Twain incorporates the figure of the Jew into his own world, in the form of the diseased body. Thirty years later, when he published his essay "Concerning the Jews," Twain had something of a reputation as a strong foe of anti-Semitism. What Gilman shows is that Twain's changed constructions participated in a new discourse of Jewishness, linked to a potential use for Jews, in Reconstruction projects to justify Caucasian hegemony, as models of health and immunity from disease. Twain's intervention now calibrated racial stigmatism differently. Jews were victims, who had internalized their oppression, and who were now invited to put aside "cunning" and undertake their "civic responsibility." Gilman's exemplary study shows how misleading it may be to focus on race bias, anti-semitism, and misogyny without seeking out their responsibility to enveloping yet specific cultural investments and motivations.

The antebellum, civil war, and reconstruction periods provide the core terrain for *Subjects and Citizens*, with some privileging of the construction of African-American and mulatto masculinity, the differing trajectory of black interventions in abolitionist debates, and the projection of black female agency through domestic and familial scenarios. The two essays on Native American subjects, by Timothy Sweet and Siobhan Senier, both contest the dogmatism of Paula Gunn Allen, in her assertion that “[t]raditional tribal lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not, and they are never patriarchal” (219); both essayists are cautious about interpreting densely-mediated translations of oral narratives, and suggest the need to find a useful point of separation between the issue of patriarchy and constructions of masculinity. In Kristin Carter-Sanborn’s analysis of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, the volume offers its single probe into “multicultural” fiction, demonstrating that such fictions call out for nuanced readings; and Ramon Saldívar’s exposition of Paredes’s writing stands alone in its engagement with Chicano textuality.

The “case” of Anita Hill closes the volume, in essays by Lauren Berlant and Karla F. C. Holloway. In Berlant’s “The Queen of America Goes to Washington City,” Hill shares the podium with two key figures for the volume as a whole, Harriet Jacobs and Frances Harper; while Holloway’s “The Body Politic,” invoking Phillis Wheatley in eighteenth-century New England, foregrounds the stark and persistent confrontation with a powerful (white, male) judicial authority by a black woman who must break codes of silence in the most intimidating public and political spaces. Both essays serve to underline that a new historicism refurbishes techniques of close reading and interrogation to enable some apparently trans-historical “truths,” like the one Lauren Berlant suggests, about (the same) “Questions About America” (464).

After reading this important volume through twice, with considerable excitement, I concluded that the best essays of *Subjects and Citizens* will prove provocative and, indeed, seminal, for the ongoing project of reformulating American literary history. And, since my interest in American literature and culture is largely post-postcolonial, post-Foucauldian, and post-nation/narrativity (*pace* Homi Bhabha), I can do no better than end with a quotation from the Introduction, by Michael Moon and Cathy N. Davidson:

Nations within nations, nations within citizens as well as citizens within nations, nationality as a segmentable and comparative quality rather than either an absolute possession or lack: such are some of the at times jarring representations or reorientations these essays require us to make in our habitual modes of thinking. But we have much to gain—as subjects, as citizens, and as students . . . —from joining in making the kinds of resitings these essays invite. (6)

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