

Writing and America

Edited by
**Gavin Cologne-Brookes,
Neil Sammells and
David Timms**



Crosscurrents

WRITING AND AMERICA

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General Editors' Preface

Crosscurrents is an interdisciplinary series which explores simultaneously the new terrain revealed by recently developed methodologies while offering fresh insights into more familiar and established subject areas. In order to foster the cross-fertilisation of ideas and methods the topic broached by each volume is rich and substantial and ranges from issues developed in culture and gender studies to the re-examination of aspects of English studies, history and politics. Within each of the volumes, however, the sharpness of focus is provided by a series of essays which is directed to examining that topic from a variety of perspectives. There is no intention that these essays, either individually or collectively, should offer the last word on the subject – on the contrary. They are intended to be stimulating rather than definitive, open-ended rather than conclusive, and it is hoped that each of them will be pithy, and thought-provoking.

Each volume has a general introduction setting out the scope of the topic, the various modes in which it has been developed and which places the volume as a whole in the context of other work in the field. Everywhere, from the introduction to the bibliographies, pointers will be given on how and where the ideas suggested in the volumes might be developed in different ways and different directions, and how the insights and methods of various disciplines might be brought to bear to yield new approaches to questions in hand. The stress throughout the books will be on crossing traditional boundaries, linking ideas and bringing together concepts in ways which offer a challenge to previously compartmentalised modes of thinking.

Some of the essays will deal with literary or visual texts which are well-known and in general circulation. Many touch on

primary material which is not easily accessible outside major library collections, and where appropriate, that material has been placed in a portfolio of documents collected at the end of each volume. Here again, it is hoped that this will provide a stimulus to discussion; it will give readers who are curious to explore further the implications of the arguments an opportunity to develop their own initiatives and to broaden the spectrum of their reading.

The authors of these essays range from international writers who are established in their respective fields to younger scholars who are bringing fresh ideas to the subjects. This means that the styles of the chapters are as various as their approaches, but in each case the essays have been selected by the general editors for their high level of critical acumen.

Professor Barrie Bullen
Dr Paul Hyland
Dr Neil Sammells

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GCB
NS
DT

We are grateful to Zomba Music Publishers Ltd for permission to reproduce an extract from 'Born in the USA' words and music Bruce Springsteen © 1984 Bruce Springsteen (ASCAP)/Zomba Music Publishers Ltd. for UK & Eire. Regina Barreca's essay makes use of some material previously published in her contribution on 'Social Comedy' in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, edited by Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1995.

We have unfortunately been unable to trace the copyright holder of 'Warehouseman Blues' by Jack Dupree and would appreciate any information which would enable us to do so.

In Memoriam
Les Arnold, 1943–1992

Writing and America: an introduction

Gavin Cologne-Brookes

‘A nation is an act of the imagination’, writes Terry Eagleton, ‘“a country of the mind”, rather than a tract of land or collection of individuals. It is in effect a myth – and it needs that myth making mechanism known as literature to sustain it’.¹ If Eagleton is right and countries are, to use Seamus Heaney’s specific example, ‘Englands of the mind’,² such views are perhaps most applicable to the topic of *Writing and America*. Certainly, this vision is often evident in American writing. To use the example of Wallace Stevens, in ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ the inhabitant or reader of a landscape ‘is the maker of the song she sang’, and humanity the ‘artificer of the world’. Effectively, ‘whatever self’ a landscape or country has, it becomes ‘the self’ that is ‘her song’.³ As Stevens puts it in ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’, a poem at least tangentially about the reaching and reading of America, that is perhaps ‘worth crossing seas to find’.⁴

On the other hand, in the same poem Stevens suggests an opposing way of viewing America. In the opening lines, mankind – as with Eagleton and Heaney – is ‘the intelligence of his soil, / The sovereign ghost’. But later in the poem Stevens reverses this to assert that ‘his soil is man’s intelligence’ (line 280). In varied ways, all the essays in *Writing and America* illustrate one or both observations. While America is written into being, American writing, which totals up into the idea of America, is itself shaped by the physical geography of the land.

Writing America

The idea of America – the ‘New World’ as described by and subsequently named after a Florentine merchant, and colonized

by wave on wave of free emigrants from Europe and Asia and enslaved Africans – is synonymous with the writing that has formed America. Over the past five centuries, America has been literally written and rewritten into existence from within and beyond its boundaries. The writings of and about the country are a palimpsest in which texts do not so much erase their predecessors as rewrite, distort, develop or annotate them to create the multi-layered readings of the nation. *Writing and America*, a volume of essays by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic and from a variety of disciplines, charts a range of these responses from colonial times to the present, offering samplings of the multifarious sources and renewals evident in this writing and rewriting of a nation.

This volume's premise, moreover, is that what Eagleton calls the 'myth making mechanism' is not just literature. Rather, many forms of writing go into that 'act of the imagination' that we call a nation. For a start there are the documents that have created official America. The central legal and political concepts that define America as a nation dedicated (here and there and now and then) to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' are on paper in the form of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. But just as the Constitution is itself organic, growing and moulded by the needs of new generations and new challenges, so too an enormous range of other texts – from Presidential addresses to advertisements for Pepsi; from Supreme Court judgements to the songs of Paul Simon – have contributed to what President Clinton, in his suitably abstract Inaugural Address, called 'the mystery of American renewal': the ideological and rhetorical construction and reconstruction of America and Americanness.

If the nation's sense of self owes much to its indigenous texts, and the perpetuation of certain key concepts dating back to the European colonists' rejection of British sovereignty, it also owes a good deal to European ideas of America. The British Romantics, for instance – notably Blake, Coleridge and Southey – revealed a view of America that influenced Americans in the attempts of the new Republic to differentiate itself from the Old World. In addition, on both sides of the Atlantic, constructions of America not only owe much to the visions and revisions evident in American texts, but also to a host of external viewpoints. These range from the actual travel writings or diaries of, say, Alexis de

Tocqueville, Dickens, Camus and Jonathan Raban, to the imagined or more symbolic American landscapes of Franz Kafka, Vladimir Nabokov and Michel Butor.

An equally large body of writing, including some of the above, has expressed clear dissent from the often-accepted understanding of American nationhood. While feminist writers and black writers have objected to a traditionally 'white male' vision of the 'American', to dissent in one form or another has been a key role played by all kinds of American poets, novelists and playwrights from Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville, through Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright to Arthur Miller, Kathy Acker and E. L. Doctorow.

If subversion of the *status quo* is common to a great deal of writing and almost all humour, in America a perennial source of dissent has also been region. Much of the writing has a regional flavour: while Joan Didion's Californians and Bernard Malamud's Jewish Brooklyn shopkeepers have little in common, the upstate New York of Richard Russo's *Mohawk* (1986), Joyce Carol Oates's *Foxfire* (1993), or William Heyen's poetry, for all their distinct differences, share a recognizably common regional culture. But for historical reasons to do, respectively, with notions of the frontier and the 'peculiar institution' of slavery, the West and South have been the most vocal regions of dissent, and therefore those regions most examined from a regional perspective.⁵ The very style and subject matter of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) proclaims a desired freedom from what was then, and perhaps still is, the power-nexus of the north-eastern United States, in favour of the southwestern region of Twain's Missouri boyhood. Writing of the Deep South, too, has traditionally asserted – before and beyond the abolition of slavery – that, as W. J. Cash put it, 'the South is another land'.⁶

In some cases this is plainly so. Take, for example, the reactionary Agrarian poets of the 1920s and 1930s, centring at first around the Nashville Fugitives, including poets such as Donald Davidson, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom. Their position is overtly stated in the essay collection *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). The tenor of the movement was to uphold the 'agrarian tradition' of the South as a way of life markedly different from that of the supposedly urban North. But it is also true of such distinctly southern voices as Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren,

Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor. Moreover, the layering of textual 'voices' that make up the South's peculiar history is well illustrated in such William Faulkner novels as *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which burrow down into a southern past very often too deep and dark to distinguish history from myth.

Indeed, much of this regional sense of identity has traditionally been couched in terms of regional myth. The western myth of the frontier, articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner in 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893), had its southern counterparts in the *ante bellum* myths of benign, patriarchal slavery and Walter-Scott style chivalry, as satirized by Twain. These myths in turn transformed into the *post bellum* southern myths of the Lost Cause and a way of life, as Margaret Mitchell would have it, *Gone with the Wind*. The title of Richard Gray's book on American southern writing, *Writing the South* (1986) – a book 'written in the belief that the South is primarily a concept' rather than being 'significantly different from the rest of the nation' – pinpoints this intimacy between writing and the mythology of region, and, by extension, between writing, myth and America's overall sense of nationhood.⁷ Equally, the essays in this book are as often about Writing America as about Writing *and* America since, in its various parts and as a whole, America is written into being.

Certainly, then, there are 'official' texts that, like sacred script, seek to unify what might otherwise fly apart, and works that defy such unifying urges. The Pledge of Allegiance, Irving Berlin's 'God Bless America' or the nation's motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, can be set against more obviously centrifugal texts. These include not only regional writings that defy notions of national unity, but also forms of political dissent from Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) to Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), as well as postmodern novels like Barry Hannah's *Ray* (1980), Ishmael Reed's *The Terrible Twos* (1982), or Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984). Yet so strong is the idea of America, and so powerful the will to achieve American identity in a country diverse in geography, climate, ethnic and cultural origin, and historical experience, that the urge is often simultaneously toward unity *and* diversity. 'Do I contradict myself?' asked Whitman. 'Very well then . . . I contradict myself.'⁸ From Whitman on, American writers have often embraced the contradictions

inherent in the American myths of freedom and equality, unity and diversity, patriotism and individualism.

Race, gender or background are no bar to this. F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose *The Great Gatsby* (1925) has been so central to the traditional twentieth-century American literary canon, defined 'a first-rate intelligence' (ironically in 'The Crack-Up' (1936)) as 'the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function'.⁹ But perhaps the clearest examples of conscious struggle between the conflicting ideals of embracing a democratic vision yet asserting one's individual struggle occur in the writing of those who see themselves, or are seen as, racially, culturally, sexually or by gender outside the historically constructed American norm. For to rebel, in a country where the individual's search for freedom and success is the official ideal, is paradoxically to operate within a predominant national myth.

To take the examples of first women's writing and then black writing: it disturbs Marya, in Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya, A Life* (1987), 'that virtually nothing of what she read had been written by women', so she determines, with that typical American urge to remake, that '*she* would change all that'.¹⁰ In doing so, however, Marya embarks on an intellectual as well as a social version of the quintessentially American, Horatio Alger story of rags-to-riches. Equally, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois describes the 'double-consciousness' of black Americans, whereby 'one ever feels his twoness – an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings', a contradictory sense of identity which is echoed by many black American writers who preceded or followed Du Bois.¹¹

The contradictory tensions of being an American are notably apparent in the polemical essays of James Baldwin. Again and again, in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and elsewhere, Baldwin affirms national ideologies even as he denies them, attacks them even as he celebrates them. 'In order to survive as a human, moving, moral weight in the world', he writes in his celebrated 1963 essay, *The Fire Next Time*,

America and all the Western nations will be forced to re-examine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now

taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long.¹²

For all his anger, Baldwin's call for radical re-examination is also the perennial American call, exemplified in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, to throw off the shackles of the past. His emphasis on renewal, on self-analysis, and indeed his ultimate optimism, are fundamental American traits. In the act of invoking the need to undo the work of the American past and the current *status quo*, he thus illustrates his very Americanness as a writer. Faced, moreover, with white Americans' assertion of hierarchical difference from blacks, his writing exemplifies Du Bois's sense of 'double-consciousness'. Mixed with his own call for black self-assertion, he sought that *other* quintessentially American ideal: unity and equality. 'The one thing that all Americans have in common', he writes in *Nobody Knows My Name*, 'is that they have no other identity apart from the identity which is being achieved on this continent'.¹³

In such ways, Baldwin encapsulates the contradictions of the American vision as eloquently as any American writer. His career was built on the anguish and indignation of being subject to the contradiction of loathing and loving America; of believing in the potential of its ideals, yet despairing at the chasm between the ideal and the real. American writers can only ever harness the ideals of the nation to their own ends. They can never depart from the national myth, since that myth is contradictory, asserting both a drive toward national unity, but also theoretically blessing the individual's struggle toward personal freedom. Therein lies the contradiction involved – in artistic terms anyway – in writing and rewriting America.

In the same essay, for instance, Baldwin writes of black American music, so influential on 'white' rock music, but this time to assert racial *difference*, at least of interpretation. 'In all jazz, and especially in the blues', he says, 'there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged'. However, he continues, 'white Americans seem to feel that happy songs are *happy* and sad songs *sad*, and that, God help us, is exactly the way most white Americans sing them'.¹⁴ Too, in the very assertion of difference, Baldwin uses American, or white, or even

Christian language, though – as in his use of the phrase ‘God help us’ – we are in little doubt of his irony.

Of course, while differing racial experiences may exacerbate misunderstanding, all texts are open to conflicting interpretations depending on the reader’s predisposition. Yet American voices in particular are often misread or ‘rewritten’ not just because of the differing experiences of writer and reader, singer and listener, but because, as with Baldwin, the contradictory pulls toward assent and dissent are inherent within the work. When, for example, American concert crowds in the 1980s waved American flags as Bruce Springsteen sang ‘Born in the USA’, a first response might be that they saw it as merely a new version of ‘The Star Spangled Banner’. But were they necessarily asserting a raucous nationalism as simplistically, or singlemindedly, as in Britain Proms audiences and church congregations sing Blake’s ‘Jerusalem’? Is it conceivable that, knowing the lyrics, many of them were waving their Stars and Stripes ironically, on behalf of their young American predecessors sent to slaughter in Vietnam?

Quite possibly many were doing both. As with the similarly misreadable social call-to-arms of ‘Jerusalem’, and its attack on industrialization, ‘Born in the USA’ ostensibly sends out a message of national pride, yet is unquestionably about the hard facts of being a working class American. Such lyrics as ‘Got in a little hometown jam so they put a rifle in my hand / Sent me off to a foreign land to go and kill the yellow man’, clearly attack American foreign policy in the late 1960s for its use and abuse of so many of Springsteen’s generation, American and Vietnamese. Similarly, subsequent lyrics describe the veteran returning to find no work available at the refinery and, aside from the penitentiary, ‘nowhere to go’.¹⁵

This kind of incorporation of national myths within a text that undercuts those myths is a common occurrence in American writing. In poetry, for instance, Robert Frost’s much-anthologized ‘The Road Not Taken’ would seem to owe its popularity to its ostensible celebration of the American individualist ideal. Echoing Thoreau, the speaker asserts that, of two paths, he ‘took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference’. It is only, perhaps, on reflection that the reader notices that the speaker is looking back with a ‘sigh’ and that the title points to the road *not* taken.¹⁶ Frost, in other words, is writing about the dangers

and difficulties that complicate an individual's choice as to whether to follow social expectations or defy them. In all kinds of American writing, is irony indeed defined, in the words of a Julian Barnes character, 'as what people miss'?¹⁷

As in Baldwin, Springsteen and Frost, pinpointing irony in American writing is an elusive enterprise because various contradictory sentiments are at war within the author, the work, and the audience. In Springsteen's song, for instance, the reference to 'the yellow man' is potentially readable as racist. Seen in the context of his songs as a whole, such a view would be perverse, and the line becomes an ironic allusion to the racism that helps explain the absurdity of the Vietnam War. On the other hand, this album brought Springsteen's music to a new, younger generation, with less interest in Springsteen as a spokesman for a generation of working class Americans sent to Saigon in the 1960s and early 1970s and, if alive, often out of work in 1980s America. His popular success, moreover, was not just due to the more obviously 'pop' singles from the album – notably 'Dancing in the Dark' – which markedly contrasted with album tracks like 'Working on the Highway' and 'Darlington County', let alone such songs as 'Factory' and 'Atlantic City' from earlier albums.¹⁸ It was also due to a pervasive mood in America of renewed, belligerent nationalism. Tired of their country's perceived weakness in the face of the Iranian hostage crisis under Carter's administration, many Americans fell in behind Reagan's re-affirmation of national self-belief. This included a return to strong denunciations of Soviet Communism as what Reagan called 'the Evil Empire', and thereby a reassertion of America as leader of the 'free world'. It also led to a rewriting of the Vietnam War in popular mythology as something that, in the hands of Sylvester Stallone, sometimes looked absurdly like victory.

Indeed, is the question of how to hear 'Born in the USA' any easier to answer when we consider that this album appeared in 1984, and the 1980s was also Stallone's big decade, with *First Blood* released in 1982 and *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* in 1985? Gung-ho nationalism, pumping iron, and Reaganite America's renewed sense of strength were synonymous, so that even Springsteen, whose 1960s physique apparently led to a failed physical that kept him out of Vietnam, now worked out and wore a Ramboesque bandanna.¹⁹ The problem with 'Born in the

USA' – and, for that matter, 'Jerusalem' – is that it is all too easy to grasp the less subtle of two contradictory possible meanings.

The point, in any case, is that writing in and of America has not only always been open to definitions as diverse as those attributed to the gold doubloon Ahab nails to the mast in *Moby-Dick* (1851), or indeed to the whale himself, but often explicitly holds 'two opposed ideas', or contradictory readings, within it. In the nineteenth century, what Christine Bolt calls the 'popular catch-phrase' of the nation's 'manifest destiny', to advance across to the Pacific and populate the entire continent from the Forty-Ninth Parallel down to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mexican border, depended for its popularity on the given points of view of the continent's inhabitants.²⁰ Indeed, in the light of the environmental crisis, the word 'destiny' has proved to be ever more clearly double-edged. Jonathan Weiner, for example, in *The Next One Hundred Years* (1990), writes of the greenhouse effect caused by the mass deforestation of the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in which woodsmen, pioneers and settlers converted forests with scattered meadows 'into an essentially continuous grassland with scattered trees'. As part of a pioneer explosion that included not only the 33 million emigrants to the United States between 1821 and 1924 but also 'South America . . . Australia, New Zealand, the Indus Valley, Siberia, Inner Mongolia, and Manchukuo', 'manifest destiny' helped change the biosphere.²¹ Such phrases, including key euphemisms like 'equality', 'liberty' and 'happiness', are endless battlegrounds of meaning because of the contradictions they seek to subsume.

Quite aside from popular catch-phrases, in a written America, as in the writing of or between any nations, no major river or byway of any political relevance is uncontestable as to its symbolic meaning. The Mississippi, as Neil Schmitz says of *Huckleberry Finn*, 'is for Huck the end of his journey', but for Jim 'the means of his deliverance elsewhere', just as, variously for others, it is the East–West divide or a trade route.²² The symbolism of the Rio Grande at El Paso is different for the American border guard or the Mexican wetback. Similarly, while the Atlantic passage may, indeed, as Jonathan Raban puts it in *Hunting Mister Heartbreak* (1991), have seemed 'the great European adventure' if you were an emigrant, it must have seemed rather different for those in transport to slavery.²³

America has traditionally been defined – in the manner of all definitions – through opposition; as another great outsider, Emily Dickinson, noted, ‘internal difference’ is ‘where the Meanings, are –’.²⁴ It is not, therefore, coincidental that Baldwin and Springsteen were writing of events at either end of the 1960s. For during this period the arguments over this sense of writing, rewriting, and therefore defining, America renewed in vigour. Arguably, the fact that the relationship between writing and nationhood nowadays seems such an issue owes much to events of that decade.

With America’s outward identity, and so its foreign policy, defined by the supposed Communist menace, the 1960s became a decade of increasing domestic turbulence. In particular, black Americans, along with many white Americans, were hacking away at the racist structures and attitudes that had helped define America’s social identity structure for centuries. In political terms, key events around the time included the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling of the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ as unconstitutional, a move that eventually led to the end of racial segregation in schools. As well as this there was the increasing visibility of the Civil Rights Movement – aided by public events like the 1963 equal rights march on Washington – the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. But in literary and cultural terms – in terms of Writing and America – the pivotal point was perhaps the 1967 publication of William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a white southern novelist’s depiction of a black slave’s insurrection from the protagonist’s viewpoint.

Styron partly based his version of Nat Turner on his talks with Baldwin, who had drafted parts of *The Fire Next Time* and *Another Country* (1962) while a guest of Styron’s. Baldwin, after all, as we have seen, called for a national merging of identity, so, in one sense, Styron appeared to echo this by merging his white sensibility with a supposed black sensibility to form an interracial American mind. At first, the novel won positive reviews, mostly from white critics, but also from blacks such as Baldwin and John Hope Franklin. Moreover, having made the cover of *Newsweek* and been praised by Baldwin for having ‘begun the common history – ours’, Styron’s novel won the Pulitzer Prize for 1968.²⁵

Within the year, however, a black backlash occurred. Most notably, a book of essays by black intellectuals appeared, edited by John Henrik Clarke. Entitled *William Styron's 'Nat Turner': Ten Black Writers Respond*, the essays challenged, and in some cases attacked and sought to discredit, Styron's novel. Many of the arguments had to do with the novel's perceived historical inaccuracy. The charges included the claim that Styron had moulded his figure to suit his own white, 'racist' purposes and ignored evidence from the original record of the confessions, written by Turner's white lawyer, Thomas Gray, and Herbert Aptheker's historical account in *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1939), that suggested a quite different – more heroic – picture of the insurrectionist.

While that controversy was in many ways rooted in the climate of the 1960s, in another sense the arguments it engendered, not least the far broader question of who writes history, have never really gone away. In 1992, Albert Stone published *The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature and Cultural Politics in Sixties America*, specifically devoted to the role of the Turner controversy in that decade, and Stone elsewhere goes so far as to suggest that the novel had an 'initiating role in redirecting attention to the actual and symbolic function of history within our multicultural culture'.²⁶

Certainly it has had wider repercussions as a cultural watershed since it hit on an issue that has proved fertile soil for argument in subsequent years: the fact that history does not exist per se, but is *made*, and had been made, with particular relevance for America as a multi-ethnic democracy, largely by white males of which Styron was palpably yet another. Many of the contributors, who included not only literary critics, but novelists, teachers, a political scientist, a historian, a librarian and a psychiatrist, argued not merely that Styron wrote the wrong book, the wrong version, but that he had no *right* to embark on the project in the first place, and so continue the long line of white definitions of black history.

The volume's significance lay in the fact that white Americans could no longer expect the unchallenged right to shape history to (arguably) suit their own ends. Ironically, the contradictions involved in what Styron was trying to do are the same contradictions evident in his model, Baldwin, and the contradictions

involved in any national attempt to weld one social voice with another. At what point does the joining of voices become the usurpation of one voice by the other? 'The American Negro can no longer, nor will he ever again, be controlled by white America's image of him' is a bold statement, made in 1961 and ushering in what has become a dramatic opening up of the literary canon across American and European campuses, yet it was made by the very person – Baldwin – whose call, elsewhere, for 'reconciliation' and 'fusion' helped instigate Styron's controversial leap of the imagination.²⁷

Within a couple of years Hayden White published his pioneering exploration of the narratives of history, *Metahistory* (1973), and history never seemed quite the same again. Nor, indeed, did the American past. It came to be acknowledged openly that, to use the words of the American physicist John A. Wheeler, 'the past is theory. It has no existence except in the records of the present. We are participators, at the *microscopic* level, in making that past as well as the present and the future'.²⁸ Perhaps Wheeler overstates the case. Wheeler himself, after all, helped to invent nuclear fission and to design the atomic and hydrogen bombs. Not only, therefore, may he have made rather more than a '*microscopic*' contribution to the future, but the existence of such devices proves the past to be more than 'theory'. Nevertheless, it remains true that, from the 1960s onward, writers of all kinds have increasingly acknowledged what modernists like William Faulkner had implicitly shown decades earlier: that our *access* to what we can know of (as) 'history' is first and foremost *textual*. It came to be seen, not as the linear progression of a national destiny, but as an amalgam of assertions – including not only writing but voices, film, painting, photography, or any 'signifying' media – expressing varied versions of past events.

Writing and America has consequently become a vexed issue as to the possibility of describing a uniform American identity at all. How far, the question became, can one American culture understand or know another? To what extent is the nation brought into being and developed through writing, and who has the right – the power – of the pen and computer? Paralleling this there has been a shift away from a white male dominated version of America to a rewriting of the nation, and certainly of its

history, in terms of greater pluralism. Such traditional histories of the nation as Allan Nevins and Henry Commager's *America: The Story of a Free People* (1942) were once considered earnest endeavours of historical scholarship. Yet they present selected facts of American history as a narrative recording the triumph of white settlers over 'savages' who were 'too few and too backward to be a grave impediment to colonization'.²⁹ To use the titles of Westerns from either end of the 1960s, 'Once Upon a Time in the West' American history, fuelled by Hollywood and often directed by John Ford, explained 'How the West Was Won'. But, as the title of a 1993 television documentary exemplifies, in more recent years attention to ancient cultures across the continent has revealed 'How the West Was Lost'.³⁰

Ford, as director and sheriff, with Wayne as his star, dominated the Western myth in the 1940s and 1950s. They were backed up by a posse of classic Westerns, such as Fred Zinneman's *High Noon* (1952) and George Stevens's *Shane* (1953), both about how a good white man defeats bad white men. In neither film do Native American Indians assume enough relevance to even gather, as happened in so many other Westerns, from nowhere on the horizon. But as the 1960s progressed, revisionist Westerns began to appear. As well as Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), such films would notably include Arthur Penn's 1970 version of Thomas Berger's novel, *Little Big Man* (1964). Abounding with Vietnam parallels and traversing cultures, it stars Dustin Hoffman as a supposedly 121-year-old man whose claims include having been adopted and brought up by Indians before returning to white society, eventually to become the sole survivor of Custer's catastrophe at the Little Big Horn.

Where once, too, literary scholars saw Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, Whitman and Dickinson as the key figures, the field has since diversified to include hitherto marginalized or forgotten voices of the American past, and new, multicultural voices of the present. Consequently, students are as likely now to read the work of Frederick Douglass, Louise Erdrich's Native American Indian novels about the Chippewas of North Dakota, or the Chinese-American writing of Maxine Hong Kingston, as the 'dead, white, male' canon of tradition.

It remains true that the supposed hegemony of white males

(with Dickinson as the 'token' female) was not all it seemed, and revisionists have themselves sometimes merely produced hierarchies of their own. Many of the traditional canon of nineteenth-century American writing – Whitman, Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Twain, Poe – can be viewed as outsiders or dissenters in one way or another, while Dickinson, of course, speaks for herself; a counter tradition of subversion is therefore evident long before the opening up of the canon.

In broader cultural terms, one example of this revising of the polemical revisionists is Christina Sommers's claims of intellectual dishonesty on the part of high-profile American feminists. In *Who Stole Feminism?* (1994), Sommers critically examines the arguments and evidence presented by commentators including Naomi Wolf, Catharine MacKinnon, Susan Faludi and Gloria Steinem. The results of Sommers's research are sometimes startling; she whittles down the impression Wolf gives, in *The Beauty Myth* (1991), that each year '150,000 American women die of anorexia'³¹ to a figure of less than 100.³² But they further remind us of how text-bound such arguments become, and how easily readers are manipulated by historical and social statistics presented as fact.

Indeed, Sommers's own revisionism lumps together figures of diverse approach and persuasion, so she herself perpetuates this centripetal categorizing that so easily shapes American writing. There is a vast difference in ideas and tone between Catharine MacKinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989), informed as it is by legal theory and practice, and more journalistic 'bestsellers' like *The Beauty Myth* or Faludi's *Backlash* (1991). In MacKinnon's words, the problem with a 'generalized, universal' discourse is that it fails to 'solve the disagreements, resolve the differences, cohere the specifics, and generalize the particularities'. Instead, it submerges specificity, and silences particularity.³³

For the purposes of this volume, though, the point is less the critical, cultural or historical arguments and counter-arguments themselves, than how texts of all kinds are always constructed by critics and commentators to suit contemporary ideologies. This is something that, among others, Paul Lauter writes about with regard to Herman Melville as a writer who, despite revisionists and hostile students, 'has remained atop the academic canon'. In

a 1994 essay in *American Literature*, Lauter explores Melville's rise in critical estimation in the 1920s as representing 'the ascent of the ideology we call "modernism" and of the academy and its adjuncts in the hierarchy of cultural authority'.³⁴

A result, however, of such challenges to the canon, the law, 'official' history and the *status quo*, has been that the multicultural nature of the American past and American writing is being honoured as never before. America is not – any more than any other country – a democracy of political or social equality, as the riots in Watts in the early 1990s attest, and the establishment remains predominantly white and male. But a large grouping of influential black literary, academic and political figures does now exist. One obvious literary leader is the 1992 Nobel Prize-winner, Toni Morrison, who writes in *Playing in the Dark* (1990) of how her study of canonical American writing revealed the various 'self-evident ways that Americans chose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence'.³⁵ American writing, it is now commonly acknowledged, has always been fundamentally shaped by the relationship in a society of different ethnic groups, primarily but not exclusively African and Caucasian.

The nation, then, is indeed 'an act of the imagination'. Vast and diverse as it is in its people and its geography, it is unified by an idea shaped and reinforced by writing. The emphasis of this volume, and a major intellectual focus in the past two decades, is precisely therefore that, to quote Woody Guthrie, 'this land is made' and remade, not natural. Constantly evolving, the idea of America nevertheless contains key factors in its continuation that, like human evolution, allow it to reproduce and evolve while still retaining the recognizable concept that we know as America. The writing of America, in whatever form, is also, then, the making of the American mind.

American writing

That said, Eagleton's assertion that a nation is 'an act of the imagination' is only a partial truth. Stevens, who is less certain, is more accurate. A nation is more than a notion. Eagleton's point

may be precisely that of the opening line of 'The Comedian as the Letter C': 'Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil'. But Stevens's revision of this, at the start of Section Four of the poem – 'his soil is man's intelligence' – acknowledges that, in fact, the land shapes the mind, and not just the mind the land. For neither writing about America, nor writing about its writing, can long ignore the country's geography. In a very real sense, America is 'a tract of land', and the physical facts shape the idea.

This is especially well illustrated in America's rich tradition of travel writing. This includes, among the innumerable indigenous works, such 'road' books as Nathan Asch's *The Road* (1937), John Steinbeck's *The Wayward Bus* (1947), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), and William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* (1983). As well as these, one must include well-known accounts by outsiders such as those mentioned earlier, from de Tocqueville to Raban, and a host of uncelebrated, largely forgotten journeys, like Ernest Young's *North American Excursion* (1947), describing a meandering ride from the St Lawrence to San Diego just before America entered the Second World War.

Also there are the myriad road movies, pioneered by Frank Capra's classic, *It Happened One Night* (1934), where Claudette Colbert's encounter with Clark Gable unravels by way of a very different experience of Greyhound Bus travel from, say, the marginalized bus journey Julia Roberts's character, Laura, takes in Joseph Ruben's *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1990). Such films would include, among many others, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) and Ridley Scott's feminist revision of the typical buddy system, *Thelma and Louise* (1991). But American travel writing also includes 'river' writing, from Huck and Jim's escape down the Mississippi to Raban's journey the length of it from Minnesota to Louisiana, as described in *Old Glory* (1981), to John Hildebrand's *Reading the River* (1988), an American's canoe voyage down Canada's Yukon. It includes, too, 'train' writing, from the Buster Keaton film *The General* (1926) to Paul Theroux's *The Old Patagonian Express* (1979).

Indeed, the closer you look the more the travel motif crosses all sorts of boundaries in American writing, from canonical novels like *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* through Westerns like Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) and George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) to historical accounts of

Atlantic and Westward migration. Even such films as Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925), or Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980), are, on one level, part of the travel genre. So too, in a very different sense, are the narratives of escaped slaves like Frederick Douglass, or Dee Brown's account of 'the long walk of the Navahos' in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970).³⁶ American history and writing has always been, in practical terms and in perception, about being on the move to somewhere else, whether a new land – enforced or chosen – a greater or lesser future, freedom from shackles, increasing enclosure, or outer space.

One might, in all these cases, have chosen quite different examples – Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow – of American writing specifically or tangentially merging geographic travel with what Bellow's Henderson, in the mythical Africa of *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), calls 'mental travel'.³⁷ The very multiplicity of possibilities testifies that the landscape has shaped the idea as much as the idea has given meaning to the landscape. While travel writing is a universal genre, geographic circumstances inevitably shape traditions. It seems no coincidence that one could take Paul Theroux's ill-advised attempt to journey by train around the British coast, described in *Kingdom by the Sea* (1983), and profitably compare it with Tobias Smollett's travel novel, *The Life and Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1762). Theroux's book, a bad-tempered tract mainly about frustrated connections, and Smollett's novel about a Quixotic knight who travels in full armour down the Great North Road, known nowadays as the A1, share a sense of getting nowhere slowly.

In America, on the other hand, the relationship between writing and landscape has developed quite differently. The relative vastness and diversity of the land, and the near-endless lengths of its major roads and rivers, incorporate a culture that changes only as slowly as a raft can drift. In other words, one key to the links between the writing, the culture and the geographic land mass is the unity amid the diversity. Certainly nowadays, to enter a shopping mall in San Diego or Omaha, Cincinnati or Tampa, is likely to be an almost identical experience. This sense of America as an extraordinarily homogeneous culture appears in some recent travel writing. In *American Heartbeat* (1993), for instance, the British journalist

Mick Brown laments that all American shopping malls are 'pretty much the same; all with a Gap, a Florsheim's Shoe Shop, a Radio Shack' and 'a boutique filled with expensive and useless gifts'.³⁸

As an Iowan decamped to Britain, Bill Bryson offers an expatriate view that is nevertheless often similar to Brown's. In *The Lost Continent* (1989), he writes about the uniformity of 'small town America', especially, in this case, in the Midwest. 'About all that separates them', he notes, 'are their names'.

Every fourth or fifth community will be a county town, built around a square. A handsome brick courthouse with a Civil War cannon and a monument to the dead of at least two wars will stand on one side of the square and on the other side will be businesses: a five and dime, a luncheonette, two banks, a hardware store, a Christian bookstore, a barber's, a couple of hairdressers, a place selling the sort of mens' clothing that only someone from a very small town would wear. At least two of the businesses will be called Vern's. The central area of the square will be a park, with fat trees and a bandstand and a pole with an American flag and scattered benches full of old men in John Deere caps sitting around talking about the days when they had something else to do other than sit around and talk about the days when they had something else to do.³⁹

One might, indeed, as easily be reading here about Garrison Keiller's Wisconsin in *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985) as Bryson's Iowa, or, indeed, call to mind the town square in Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985).

A reaction to this could be that it illustrates how a nation is 'an act of the imagination' that has nothing to do with geography. In the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci responded to Luigi Pirandello's 1929 declaration that 'Americanism is swamping us' by pinning the question down to how the weight of America's 'economic production' might compel Europe to overturn its own 'economic and social basis'. For Gramsci 'the elements of a "new culture" and "new way of life"' that were 'being spread around under the American label' were 'just tentative feelers'.⁴⁰ But we have reached the stage where American signs and logos, to a living generation from Paris to Moscow to Hong Kong, will seem merely global: Macdonald's and Burger King; Budweiser and Michelob. Many dividing lines are so blurred – multinational

companies, the Rolling Stones, Baskin Robbins Ice Cream – that, conversely, some things seen as American are in fact not. Even Budweiser, apparently the world's 'largest selling beer', and seen by Americans like Will Anderson in *Beer, USA* (1986) as integral to national identity, is for many Europeans a Czechoslovakian brew.⁴¹ So many distinctions have collapsed that E. M. Forster's nightmare vision of a world where few travel because 'thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over' and Peking 'just like Shrewsbury' can seem all too real.⁴²

Maybe the 'act of the imagination' known as America really is fulfilling its 'manifest destiny' and spilling way beyond its defined 'tract of land'; maybe uniformity – for good and bad – is what lies ahead. If so, perhaps Kevin Costner's oscillating accent in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), which veers between a West Coast vernacular and an 'English' accent reminiscent of the 'Mind the Gap' voice on the London Underground to come out as disc-jockey midatlanticism, is not bad cinema but the way future generations will speak, and write. Such a concern is certainly evident with Mick Brown, who in *American Heartbeat* views America as already written for his generation by popular music. His subsequent switching between fascination and hostility during his travels – a common European attitude to America – results partly from the expectations engendered by such music.

But an American paradox has always been the country's extraordinary uniformity *and* endless variety. Another explanation for Costner's confused accent in *Robin Hood* is evident on hearing him read the diary of Lieutenant John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Flat as the prairies he rides across, his actual accent is not just irretrievably American, but specifically (and problematically, given Dunbar's intrepid journey to the then-frontier) a West Coast accent, originating from somewhere around the Los Angeles suburb of Compton. This also reminds us that American *writing* retains a wide range of regional and ethnic dialects, from what Anthony Burgess once called the magnolia blossoms of William Styron's southern prose to the Jewish inflections of Isaac Bashevis Singer or Philip Roth, or black dialects used by Toni Morrison or Maya Angelou.⁴³

Different texts can suggest different Americas entirely – uniform or diverse. While the likes of Bryson and Brown lament

uniformity, this is also a country that *is* as diverse in outlook as geography. It is, after all, a land of which writers from Whitman to Nik Cohn can write about the endless variety of travelling up or down a single, famous avenue: Manhattan's Broadway. Robert M. Greenberg in *Splintered Worlds* (1993) emphasizes the effect on Whitman of his trips on omnibuses 'the whole length of Broadway', quoting Whitman's claims of 'the influence of those Broadway omnibus jaunts and drivers' on 'the gestation of "Leaves of Grass"'.⁴⁴ That such infinite variety remains the case is evident from Cohn's *Heart of the World* (1992), an account of a Broadway walking odyssey from the Battery, aiming for the Bronx.

So perhaps America, and American writing, is best discussed in terms of these various forms of moral, cultural and physical paradox. This is not least the case because the writings that launched the idea of America are deeply entrenched in part-Christian, part-Lockean Enlightenment ideals. These serve (at least rhetorically) to temper, even as they give credence to, the nation's capitalist drive. As such, Michel de Montaigne's vision of the self, coinciding with the early morning of colonization, seems to encapsulate America's subsequent development. We are, he says in his *Essays* (1581), 'double in ourselves' so that 'what we believe we do not believe, and cannot disengage ourselves from what we condemn'.⁴⁵ Not only is the country driven by high, abstract ideals and therefore troubling dilemmas, but it also exudes this sense of being double or multiple in itself: a place of many in one, one in many. The land, the writing and the culture contain a simultaneous pull towards unity and diversity, built as the latter two are on the contradictory ideals of individual freedom and social equality.

Ultimately then, what holds America together as a nation are the two things, writing and land mass; the idea and the geography both go into the shaping of the idea of America in mind and experience. Therefore, this volume deals with not just Writing America, nor just American Writing, but Writing and America. It is true that America is made out of its writing, out of the *idea* of America – a nation *is* an 'act of the imagination'. As Lincoln put it in the Gettysburg Address, America, in particular, is a nation dedicated to a 'proposition'. It is also true that without writing, and the traditions and history it captures,

inhabitants of South Dakota, Nevada, Delaware or Arkansas might appear to have nothing but language in common, and those of Alaska and southern Florida not always that. But in the end a country, especially one which, as America does, so celebrates its land- and cityscapes, is a marriage between idea and fact, between its myths and history, and its defined boundaries and physical actualities. To return to Stevens, in the end, the truth of a country lies in the contradictory pull between his first assertion, which is also Eagleton's, and his revision of that later in the poem. A nation's identity is constructed from its texts and countertexts, but also its contexts. 'Man is the intelligence of his soil' – or 'when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song' – *and* 'his soil is man's intelligence'.

Writing and America

Such, then, is the background to *Writing and America*, a volume which seeks to reflect many of the facts and tensions suggested here, and in doing so to address the issue of language – of writing – as the problematic, imperfect, yet fundamental tool for understanding America as a geographic and psychological entity.

The contributions to the volume are a blend of specific case-studies of writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and William Carlos Williams, who form a focus for discussions of American nationhood, with essays on more general topics including colonial notions of America as the Promised Land, the discourses of nationhood in the new Republic, and the sense of nationhood in American historiography and in the formation of the American literary canon. The collection also investigates the notion of stable nationhood, focusing on writers until recently beyond the canon.

It seeks as well to integrate the various component disciplines that make up American Studies, deliberately setting out to overcome conventional boundaries; historians write about literary texts, literary critics examine the construction of history. It aims, among other things, to give a sense of variety; to explore in-depth as well as broadly; to touch on, in one way or another, most kinds of writing, ranging from fiction to film, philosophy to politics, law to literary criticism, to create, in effect, a Bakhtinian

heteroglossia of merging and clashing opinions like the country itself.

Christopher Mulvey's 'American constitutions and literary traditions', describes the ideological and rhetorical role of the Constitution in America's definition of itself, and discusses the significance of the fact that a central expression of American identity is *written*. Offering a broad sweep through history, Mulvey explores the Constitution and literary tradition, examining the historical contexts that link the formation of the Constitution to More's *Utopia* (1516). He shows how the Utopian ideal gained a new lease of life with the discovery of America. He also discusses the ongoing rewriting of constitutions and the fact that laws came to be seen to be made not natural, like America itself.

A companion essay, in that it too deals with what might loosely be termed Writing and Politics, is David Seed's 'Writing out of Communism: recantation memoirs of the Cold War'. Taking Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* (1952) as a focal point, he explores the links between the varied discourses of the 1950s that take Communism as their theme, and in particular examines the way fictional tropes shape the descriptions of historical and political 'fact' in the period.

Similarly, two essays look at issues concerning Writing and Gender. In 'A sense of the ludicrous: women and humour in American literature', Regina Barreca explores the contrasting roles of women as objects and as creators of humour in American writing and culture generally through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In doing so she examines the way women's humour interrogates and subverts the contradictory ideology of American masculinity, and explores the strategy she sees as evident in women's writing for concealing the humour in their texts.

In 'The two narratives of the Western', Antony Easthope takes an opposing tack to the extent that he rebukes a feminist reading of the Western, pointing out the positive aspects of the Western myth. The essay focuses on the West as a fictional locus of the ideal of American masculinity, and examines a variety of texts, historical and literary, writing and film, from the late nineteenth century through to *Dances with Wolves* of 1990, to expose the way they construct the notion of the American man.