

WORLDS IN OUR WORDS

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS



MARILYN KALLET © PATRICIA CLARK

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EDITED BY

MARILYN KALLET

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

PATRICIA CLARK

Grand Valley State University

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*WORLDS IN
OUR WORDS*

Preface

As teachers of literature and creative writing, we became frustrated in trying to find for our classes an anthology that would include writers of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds — including white authors. As women writers, we wanted to learn more about how women authors in our century have represented themselves and their cultures within America. Even in the 1990s, many mainstream anthologies of literature still underrepresent women, particularly women of color. Furthermore, we wanted to choose a book that would include a variety of genres. And we sought enough of a historical range to enable us to trace developments in American women's writings, not merely to highlight the most recent works. Could we also find a text that featured outstanding new writers as well as American classics? We needed many worlds in one text. We realized with a growing sense of adventure that we would have to create this book ourselves.

Each of the selections in *Worlds in Our Words: Contemporary American Women Writers* has its own integrity — chosen for its formal beauty and formal risks; for its depth and range of emotions; for the liveliness and freshness of language. Each adds to the ensemble, where both variety and connectedness are hallmarks, where women's voices and women's strengths are highlighted. Juxtaposed with voices we have come to rely on for substance and for beauty — such as those of Alice Walker, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maya Angelou, and Cynthia Ozick — it is refreshing to find the vitality of newer writers such as Janice Eidus, Amy Ling, and Luci Tapahonso. Many of our authors speak of concerns that are larger than the personal — their works give voice to the aspirations of their communities as well as to their own feelings. Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olsen, Alice Childress, and Irena Klepfisz come to mind as examples of writers whose concerns are no less than the destiny of humankind. In each section of our book, women's voices are eloquent in fiction, nonfiction, drama, and poetry. As poets ourselves we took particular delight in choosing poems that we admire and in selecting prose as finely crafted as the poetry.

Our thematic organization offers a clear starting point for discussion and increases enjoyment of the narrative elements throughout the book. These themes emerge clearly in writings by women: Finding Words, Family Album, Histories, Transformations, Working Life, Many Loves, Spirit and Song, and Happiness. Of course, these themes sometimes overlap, and the works them-

selves in their artfulness resonate beyond single categories. We trust that teachers and students will question the connections we are making. What are the vital differences between the works we have juxtaposed? Our instructor's manual can assist with suggestions for class discussion and assignments.

The thematic sections mark a journey — from struggle to joy, from silence to story and song. The positive and affirming quality of women's writings has long been underestimated. No matter how difficult the struggle, most of our selections contain joy in the art of using language. The sections on "Spirit and Song" and "Happiness" emphasize many forms of joyful spirit.

Another unique feature of our book consists of the interviews we conducted with eight authors. These interviews, which appear one per section, enhance the thematic organization and add to our understanding of the creative process. Judith Ortiz Cofer, Linda Hogan, Colleen McElroy, Sylvia Watanabe, May Sarton, Nancy Willard, Joy Harjo, and Joyce Carol Thomas — these noted authors speak to us in personal voices, offering insight into their lives and work.

Worlds in Our Words aims to be both new and familiar, adding emerging writers to the readers' lists of favorites. Our introductions for each section and for each selection and our biographical notes for each author should help teachers and students to understand and enjoy the richness that is multicultural women's writing in contemporary America. The face of American literature is changing to include more women writers and more women of color, and with this anthology we are proud to be an active part of that change.

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In assembling this anthology we were fortunate to have the assistance of expert reviewers in literature, women's studies, and writing: Muriel Brown of North Dakota State University; Janet Ellerby of the University of North Carolina, Wilmington; Elaine Ginsberg of West Virginia University; Andrea C. Holland of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; Libby Falk Jones of Berea College; Sue V. Lape of Columbus State Community College; and Amy K. Levin of Central Missouri State University. Professors Deborah Castillo-Chavez and Nellie Furman of Cornell University's Women's Studies and Literature programs provided useful suggestions at the start, as did drama specialist Professor Deborah R. Geis of the City University of New York. Professor Lisa Johnston, head of Public Services and bibliographer for Gay and Lesbian Studies at Sweet Briar College Library, helped us with our research. Professor Michael Keene of the University of Tennessee encouraged us and offered practical advice as to textbook creation. Steve Pensinger also gave invaluable editorial advice.

We are most grateful to the authors whom we interviewed: Judith Ortiz Cofer, Linda Hogan, Colleen McElroy, Sylvia Watanabe, Joy Harjo, May Sar-

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Project manager Julie Sullivan provided outstanding skills — and patience. We were fortunate to have Nancy Perry of Blair Press/Prentice Hall as our editor — one with vision, courage, and a fine sense of humor. Women editors are the hope of women writers in our country, and Nancy Perry stands out as the best of the best.

Marilyn Kallet
Patricia Clark

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Finding Words



Finding Words



*F*OR WRITERS, LANGUAGE IS OUR VITAL

necessity. In our narratives, poems, and plays, language enables us to express ourselves, to discover and integrate feelings and ideas. Our writings help us to bring communities together; through words we inscribe our memories and link generations. In the following selections we find vivid images of women talking and listening to one another, as Paule Marshall describes her mother and her mother's friends talking in the kitchen, exulting in their control of language; with Judith Ortiz Cofer we sit in the shade of the mango tree and listen to Mamá, a consummate storyteller. In these and other selections, language strengthens bonds between women. Though they are not bread or mangoes, stories and poems have the potential to nourish us, to teach us about our lives and the lives of others.

Some of the stories included here warn about treachery in language. Leslie Marmon Silko's "Lullaby" bears witness to crimes committed against Native people through the manipulation of words. Historically, American writers whose native language is not English have been robbed and oppressed; today they encounter discrimination. Many of the writers in this book live in more than one world linguistically. Bilingualism and multilingualism involve tensions that these authors have transformed into artistic riches.

Unlike our own media-blitzed society, in societies based on oral tradition a word has power in itself; a name calls up being. The importance of poems and stories for traditional cultures can still be felt in the writings included here.

In Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," the author's concern with language and naming is present throughout the narrative concerning a family reunion of three women. The narrator, the mother, speaks plainly and says what she means. Her daughters, Maggie and Dee, are very different from each other — scarred and shy, Maggie has remained at home with her mother; Dee has gone off to school in Augusta and puts on airs. Dee uses language to browbeat her family: "She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice." When Dee tries to take the family quilts her mother has been saving for Maggie, the mother firmly refuses. Dee would have used them as decoration. Maggie will "put them to everyday use." Writers also

make a choice when they rely on the words of “everyday use” to render their poems and stories.

The theme of how people use language is central to Janice Eidus’s “Robin’s Nest.” Rachel and Ambrose, sixth graders, are creating their own private language. Rachel’s mother, Robin, stopped speaking in the sixties. Her husband, the plastic surgeon, discovered Robin in a hospital where she had been sent after taking LSD. He wanted to “take her home” in order to reshape her thoughts, to “be a plastic surgeon of the mind.” Touched by the children’s idealism, Robin finally speaks to Rachel and Ambrose. The mother’s healing takes place through the children’s compassion and creativity.

Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Lullaby” tells a difficult story with no waste of words. Ayah, a Navajo mother, has been pressured into signing a document that permits doctors to take away her young children. Ayah cannot read; she knows only how to sign her name. For Native people, the holocaust wrought by massacres, wars, and resettlement, treaties not honored, and children shipped off to boarding schools where they learn to forget their tribal language and tradition, continues. A guardian of culture, Silko ends her story in a traditional manner with a Navajo lullaby.

In Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “Tales Told Under the Mango Tree,” Mamá, the author’s grandmother, creates worlds through her storytelling under the mango tree in Puerto Rico. This excerpt begins with the tale of María Sabida, the smartest woman on the island. The women and girls of Cofer’s family sit in the shade of the mango tree absorbing lessons about survival that are implicit in Mamá’s entertaining stories. In this memoir, where stories and nonfiction and poems mingle, Cofer says, “It was under the mango tree that I first began to feel the power of words.”

Audre Lorde’s essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” makes the eloquent argument that poetry helps us to live, to shape our future. An integrated self is necessary for survival, and poetry offers that place “where survival and change [are] first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.” Poetry makes it possible to “give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”

Paule Marshall’s memoir “From the Poets in the Kitchen” celebrates the many purposes of the language women use in her aunt’s Brooklyn kitchen. Hard-working women gather there to talk “endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive range.” More than therapy, their “highly functional” talk integrates art and life “in keeping with the African tradition. . . .” Talk is a “refuge” for them in the complex new culture; it rescues them from “their invisibility, their powerlessness.” They “[fight] back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word.”

In “A Starfish in Mott,” Kathleen Norris celebrates one of her young students, “Hidasta, or Sioux,” whom the other children treat “as if she were invis-