

SELECTIONS

BEST OF

FROM THE

AMERICAN

BOOK

AWARDS

1980-1990

ISHMAEL REEF
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AND SHAWN WONG

EDITORS

THE BEFORE
COLUMBUS
FOUNDATION
FICTION
ANTHOLOGY
Selections from the
American Book Awards
1980 ♦ 1990

Edited by
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KATHRYN TRUEBLOOD, and
SHAWN WONG

W·W· Norton & Company
New York ♦ London

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

The text of this book is composed in 10.5/12.5 Avanta

with the display set in Bernhard Modern

Composition and manufacturing by the Haddon Craftsmen, Inc.

Book design by Margaret M. Wagner

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Before Columbus Foundation fiction anthology: selections from the American Book Awards, 1980-1990/edited by Ishmael Reed, Kate Trueblood, and Shawn Wong.

p. cm.

Includes index.

I. Short stories, American. I. Reed, Ishmael, 1938-
II. Trueblood, Kate. III. Wong, Shawn, 1949- IV. Before Columbus Foundation.

PS648.S5B44 1992

813'.0108054—dc20

91-22503

ISBN 0-393-03055-5 (Cloth)

ISBN 0-393-30832-4 (Paper)

W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

For GUNDARS STRADS

*for his unselfish and often unrewarded
sacrifice for the Before Columbus Foundation*

*The editors of this anthology
would like to thank
the board of directors of the Before Columbus
Foundation*

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RUDOLFO ANAYA
MARIE ANDERSON
GEORGE BARLOW
JOHNNELLA BUTLER
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Introduction: Redefining the Mainstream

WITH the arrival of 1992, the five hundredth anniversary of the “discovery of America” by Christopher Columbus, there may never be a more appropriate moment in American literary history for the Before Columbus Foundation to restate its mission. The promotion of an American multicultural literary tradition has been the mission of the Before Columbus Foundation for the past sixteen years. In 1990, cofounder Ishmael Reed said in a speech given in Seattle: “Our vision of the future has room for the Asian, the African, as well as the Western [European]. We don’t see these as dangerous times, as do the paranoid monoculturalists. We see these as times fraught with hope and change. As we approach the end of the century, we have an opportunity to create a better world than the one envisioned by those who lived to see the close of the nineteenth century. But if we want to see that kind of world come about, we have to work for it. Before Columbus has done some of the groundbreaking, but other institutions have to begin to lay the stones. We must go even farther—beyond Columbus.”

Founded in 1976 by a group of writers, editors, educators, and small press publishers, the Before Columbus Foundation has promoted and disseminated contemporary American multicultural literature through its American Book Awards, literary panels and seminars, and the quarterly *Before Columbus Review*, America’s only multicultural book review. Through these programs the Before Columbus Foundation has provided recognition and a wider audience for the wealth of cultural and ethnic diversity that constitutes American writing. “Multicultural” is not a description of a category of American writing—it is a *definition* of all American writing. The Before Columbus Foundation believes that the ingredients of America’s “melt-

ing pot” are not only distinct, but integral to the unique constitution of American culture—the whole comprises the parts. There are no outsiders.

The only accurate aspect of the melting-pot metaphor is heat—the heat of anger caused by ignorance and abuse. We can no more be melted into one alloy than we can expect the world to learn and speak Esperanto. The metaphor persists, however, and the Eurocentric point of view continues to be disseminated because it embodies a *come unto me* monopolistic attitude that obviates the effort to understand cultural difference—not merely racial difference.

Time magazine reported in an article entitled “Beyond the Melting Pot” (April 9, 1990): “By 2056, when someone born today will be 66 years old, the ‘average’ U.S. resident, as defined by Census statistics, will trace his or her descent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, Arabia—almost anywhere but white Europe.”

Some organizations have coined the phrase “the majorification of America’s minorities” to describe the cultural mission this fact seems to call for, and have started the movement. The mission is hidden behind a plea for public schools to return to a “basic skills” education—“basic skills” in this case meaning not only the three R’s, but also the teaching of a monocultural standard. America’s minorities, soon to be the majority, must be “majorified.” Allan Bloom makes the plea in *The Closing of the American Mind* that “society has got to turn them into Americans.” The monoculturalists always insist on a narrow place for minority cultures; an editor at a publishing house told the editors of an anthology of Asian-American literature that “the least ethnic pieces were the best.” American dominant culture strains for cohesion to stabilize its channels of power and keep its mainstream flowing. Yet a narrow view of the mainstream ignores the tributaries that feed it. American culture is not one tradition, but all traditions.

The concept of a “mainstream” culture and “minority” cultures is the narrow view. Redefining the mainstream is the theme, the message, and the mission of the Before Columbus Foundation. We have purposely kept asking questions and listening to the answers. Something curious happens when one

asks the same question over and over. We like to think the definition changes.

At a 1990 Before Columbus Foundation literary panel the question of how to go about "Redefining the Mainstream" of American literature was asked of writers Jessica Hagedorn, Jayne Cortez, J. J. Phillips, Oscar Hijuelos, N. Scott Momaday, John Barth, and Charles Johnson.

Jayne Cortez said the only "mainstream" she recognized was the Mississippi River, because it is in the middle of the country and has a Native American name. She also claimed that the American publishing establishment publishes what she considers "minority literature" and what remains unpublished is really, in fact, the "mainstream." N. Scott Momaday noted that American literature begins for him a thousand years ago and that somewhere in the more recent years of this enormous and rich history the "Puritan invasion" of America took place.

It takes fierce conviction to go on writing while your work eddies at the edges of the "mainstream," relegated to subculture status by a hyphen (African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic-American) despite demographic breakthroughs and democratic ideals. The luckier writers in this anthology have broken free and make a living at writing, but the majority do not, though they continue to publish with the small presses that keep them alive. Most large publishing houses still relegate multicultural literature to special-interest markets.

In 1978, the Before Columbus Foundation decided that one of its programs should be a book award that would, for the first time, recognize and honor excellence in American literature without discrimination or bias with regard to race, sex, creed, cultural origin, size of press or ad budget, or even genre. There would be no fees or forms. There would be no requirements, restrictions, or limitations. There would be no rankings, no first place, and no losers. There would be no categories ("best novel," "best black poet," or "best nonfiction work by an Asian American woman published by a West Coast small press," and so on); nor would "mainstream" white male Anglo-Saxon New York-based authors be excluded. Books could be submitted or nominated by anyone, including the author. Previously published books, neglected books, new editions—all would be eligi-

ble. The only criterion would be an outstanding contribution to American literature, in the opinion of the judges.

The winners of the American Book Awards are not selected by any quota or criteria for diversity. They simply come out that way. All winners are accorded equal standing and are recognized for the body of their work as well as for the particular work for which they receive the award. Their publishers are also honored for both their commitment to quality and their willingness to take the risks that accompany publishing outstanding books and authors that might not prove “cost-effective.” There are special award designations (Lifetime Achievement, Editor/Publisher, Criticism, and Education) for contributions to American literature that go beyond single titles and for contributions that require distinction from strictly book-oriented consideration. However, these are descriptive rather than qualitative designations, and all winners remain on equal standing.

The first annual American Book Awards were held in New York City in the early spring of 1980, auspiciously, but also with a certain bewildered reticence on the part of the publishing industry. Many houses were unsure how to respond to what seemed on the surface an “ethnic” or “alternative” or even “literary vigilante” endeavor. The West Coast base of the Before Columbus Foundation also occasioned uncertainty. Then there was the distraction of a more amply financed, industry-sponsored award bearing the same name that appeared later that year—and that has since undergone several controversies and transformations, including a change of name. Nevertheless, many recognized the expansive “otherness” of the smaller but more inclusive upstart—an awards program that celebrated a multiplicity of small presses and emerging poets and numerous anti-mainstream tributaries. The awards ceremonies always featured subversive and uniquely American musical forms (jazz and blues from people such as Charles Brown, Allen Toussaint, John Handy, Bill Bell, and Steve Allen). People began to appreciate our difference, and began to wonder why we had to be called different at all. Over the years, support for these “other American” book awards grew slowly from a steady wellspring.

The second annual awards were again held in New York City, at Joseph Papp's Public Theater. Then the awards dared to defect back to the West Coast, to the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, to San Francisco's renowned Keystone Korner jazz club, and to the hallowed enclaves of the University of California at Berkeley. The awards then moved to the American Booksellers Association conventions, the publishing industry's annual trade show, to provide better access for the award winners and their publishers to the media and the book trade. Sites for the awards ceremonies continued to span the nation: the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, the Storyville Jazz Hall in New Orleans, the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., and on to Philadelphia, Anaheim, and Miami. There was even a USIA-sponsored trip to the Frankfurt Bookfair.

If the locations of the ceremonies were diverse, the award winners themselves also could not be pigeonholed. They could not be described as coming from a particular literary community, nor were they always "minority," "small press," or "non-mainstream" in origin. While sometimes radical, they were not radically distinct—just unique. And they came from all over America.

As the reputation of the American Book Awards spread, the public's impression matured. The industry and the media have come tentatively to accept and even embrace the perception of America as a multicultural literary community. The awards were never criticized for being too representative.

But is America ready to recognize the amazing cultural wealth it embodies? The signals are mixed, and most of the American Book Award winners are reserved optimists at best. We circulated a questionnaire asking American Book Award winners (fiction writers and poets) to tell us about their concerns, communities, and travails, and in their collective response we heard the chorus America must learn to sing, not someday soon, but now.

Duane Niatum noted, "Multiculturalism seems to be on the rise, but this is also paradoxical. Racism is also very much in vogue again." The hate crimes perpetrated in the last few years certainly support his view, and yet multiculturalism has finally

become “news” and hit the front pages of national magazines and newspapers. Perhaps Carolyn Lau best explained the concurrent trends when she told us: “I think people feel that if I give up my prejudice, I lose my identity.”

The American Book Award winners reacted strongly to the issue of naming and ethnicity. Not surprising. The vehemence of the opinions recorded by our questionnaire reveals real impatience with an entrenched point of view. Quincy Troupe felt that “we should *all* be called just plain American and fuck all this hyphenated bullshit.” Gary Snyder suggested that “all whites” be called “Euro-Americans.” In either case, the desire to claim and affirm equal validity for one’s heritage is expressed, and such was the general sentiment among the American Book Award winners. As Juan Felipe Herrera said, “All communities are ethnic if they care to scratch themselves a bit.”

Closely related to this issue of categorization was that of stereotypes in popular culture. When asked if he felt stereotypes persist and are being created in contemporary American culture, Amiri Baraka responded with an exclamatory “Recycled!” John Norton’s reaction was subversive and insightful, along the lines of good advice for young writers: “I like to work the stereotypes and move them in unexpected directions. Play against the stereotypes and confound those who want to hold on to them.” Clearly, old biases will not just go away and die; they must be disintegrated bit by bit.

In writing about their communities, these authors are a unique force in the revision of American culture and history. The work of the American Book Award winners is marked by a sense of indebtedness to the communities from which they came and the desire to give in return. It is a quality one rarely hears about when writers are interviewed. Linda Hogan told us: “I work frequently on reservations, which makes me feel rich and sustained, that my work is all that I want it to be, and returns love to the people I come from.” The American Book Award winners don’t balk at addressing the oppressive connotations that underlie the term “dominant culture.” The New Mexico novelist Nash Candelaria sees his relationship to his community as essential to his work: “My goal is to place Hispanic North Americans in the context of U.S. history. Some of

us have been here a long time, back before the Pilgrims, and deserve better than to be considered 'foreigners' in our own country and to be dealt with as stereotypes." Maurice Kenny stated simply and eloquently: "I have attempted in my poems and stories to clean the lies of history and the historian. I have attempted to bring my piece of kindling to the village fire." Milton Murayama was adamant about the writer's role in recording untold stories and the power of fiction to engage the reader's sensory imagination: "A writer is a historian. He can tell it in flesh and blood the way it was."

For women, the revision of history through literature is an ongoing claim to presence and power. Josephine Hendin explained the impetus for her novel: "I wanted to describe the relationship between an Italian-American father and daughter in a way that had not been done. So often the stories of immigrant life have been limited to the story of fathers and sons. . . . I tried to discuss the extent to which the conflict of generations may be shaped by the war between the sexes." Susan Howe sees her specialty as "North American history—specifically that of New England" and hopes in her work to "show that we have been told the wrong story . . . to continue to explore the gaps in the story of women and their role in early American culture and literature."

Overall, the questionnaires that came back to us revealed a high degree of political urgency and intensity about the need for social change. A number of writers reminded us of the power of literature to effect revolutionary change, and the writers they mentioned are a diverse lot: Thoreau, Brecht, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Whitman, Kerouac, Che Guevara, Malcolm X. William Oandasán noted the power of literature to "liberate, invade, and secure space in print through time."

American Book Award winners are keenly aware of their role as models for a generation of young who currently receive little recognition of their aspirations or cultural identity. Judy Grahn urged young writers to "believe in your own experience as true knowledge worthy of becoming literature." Cyn Zarco's advice was pragmatic, dispelling the destructive mystique: "Don't drink a lot and don't play with drugs. Your memory is a library and no one's in but you. Any writer who has to get high to write

is no genius but one hungup dude. This romantic notion, poet manqué stuff is bunk. Feeling overwhelmed? Write it down and don't throw it away." Alma Luz Villanueva spoke in analogies relevant to feminist writers: "Have the receptivity of a pregnant woman and the tenacity of an Amazon warrior." Russell Banks addressed the conflict created by external success and internal isolation, the need to choose priorities: "Don't confuse your life's work with your career." The advice to young writers that we received is worthy of a book on its own, and any young writer would do well to tape, staple, or thumbtack such words of wisdom above the typewriter.

The writers who appear here are a diverse lot. Their past occupations include plumber, waiter, secretary, vegetable clerk, advertising copywriter, real estate salesman, foundry worker, social worker, newspaper stringer, editorial assistant, printer's assistant, technical writer, and railroad brakeman. Leslie Scalapino merely reported that she had worked at "odd" jobs. Jimmy Santiago Baca described his early years as "blind desperation" and himself as "a beggar on the fringe." John A. Williams gave us a list of jobs that read like a litany, after which he "freelanced and prayed." Salvatore La Puma described how he fed the creative flame while satisfying what exigencies required of him: "I wrote commercially for a dozen years to earn my living. Then wrote secretly, a sentence or a paragraph a day, to keep from being killed off. And waited until now for the quiet to arrive so I could hear my own voice. Waiting all these years hasn't wasted time. Along the way I've often been kicked in the ass, kicked a little myself, been down and out, risen from the dead, a little wild, a lot heartbroken, and witnessed friends and enemies living and dying, the bravery and idiocy in relatives, in my own children, and in myself. So I can write now, I hope, with a little understanding, if not forgiveness." Any young writer who feels trapped, deterred, isolated, weary, or just plain disillusioned should take heart in knowing that the lives behind the poems and stories in these volumes were as rich with struggle as his or her own.

There is affirmation to be found in the astounding variety of dictions, cadences, and forms that cover these pages, perhaps a

range never made available before, one we hope is enabling, so that others may hear their own voices, distinct and clear at last. "Distinct" is the operative theme of this anthology. The challenge that America faces is to learn to celebrate difference rather than to fear and condemn it. This anthology is dedicated to that effort, and to writers like Jimmy Santiago Baca who see their role as "engagement at all levels, to intellectually confront, emotionally risk, and compassionately dream the vision of a better world into reality." We must begin by confronting the past so that the skeins with which we weave the future are strong and vibrant, and by contrast create a wondrous design. In the words of Victor Hernandez Cruz: "The works herein are defining not only our historical journey but also exposing an inner landscape taking shape today. Right here in Los Angeles. Right here in New York. Hello America. This is America."

The world is here in America, and English is a living language enriched by the legacy of immigrants, refugees, native peoples, and those brought by force. Alan Chong Lau shapes a language that reveals the pain of adaptation: "The day the language is sanitized to a uniformity devoid of nuance and personality, we are in trouble. At times, my work reflects the use of English by my ancestors. I can only hope I haven't lost it all." Hilton Obenzinger told us, "I write with my parents' Polish and Yiddish, plus some Hebrew and Arabic, along with my wife's Filipino, always jangling in my ears: these different languages chomp and coagulate into a pulp in my American mouth." Raymond Federman, a Jewish survivor of World War II, attributes an unusual liberation to the original estrangement: "As an incurable foreigner (I was born in France and learned my first word of English when I was nineteen), I use and abuse the English language because for me it is a borrowed language. I am free in it." Elizabeth Woody, a poet of Wasco/Navajo descent, keeps an ear finely tuned to the pressures that extend English beyond conventional usage: "The minds in my community on the reservation are quick and intelligent, and inventive with language. There are two or three languages wanting to live through English." The speech patterns of those not native to English make us hear the infinite possibilities of

language, free us from the banal like the good cold shock of a dive into water. Clichés scatter; language is reimagined; an image suddenly brilliant emerges.

Gundars Strads
Kathryn Trueblood
Shawn Wong

Berkeley, Bellingham,
and Seattle
January 1991

The Ocean of American Literature

ISHMAEL REED

IN 1976, I applied for and received a modest grant from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines to begin a distribution outlet for “third world” magazines. The names of the magazines we distributed reflected the multicultural audience we were attempting to reach: *Roots*, *Ravens Bones Journal*, *Revista Chicano-Requena*, *Truck*, *Telephone*, *Tree*, *Black Scholar*, *Unmuzzled Ox*, *New World Journal*, *Carp*, *Sun Tracks*, *Tejidos*, *Obsidian*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *HooDoo*, *De Colores*, and *Tin Tan*.

The grant required that I have a partner, and so I chose poet Victor Hernandez Cruz, whom I’d met in New York in 1966. I was working in the Poetry in the Schools program then, and I remember going to Benjamin Franklin High School and announcing, during my reading there, that one of the best American poets was enrolled in the school. When I mentioned Victor’s name, the students and teachers gasped. Victor Cruz, who has since that time gained a reputation as an international bilingual poet, was failing Spanish. He was eighteen at the time. By the early eighties, *Life* magazine would run a story in which Victor was featured as one of eleven of America’s most distinguished poets.

The next member to join the distribution group—which I named Before Columbus, in order to acknowledge the existence of an American literature before the arrival of the Europeans—was Shawn Wong. Shawn had been introduced to me by playwright Frank Chin, whose work had appeared in a Doubleday anthology I edited entitled *Nineteen Necromancers from Now*. Shawn had also been one of the editors of the Asian-American issue of *Yardbird Reader*, which Al Young and I used

to edit. He was also an editor of *Califia*, an anthology of multicultural writing that Al Young and I published.

We then added Rudolfo Anaya, who was beginning to build an international reputation with his novel *Bless Me Ultima*. Rudolfo had been my colleague on the board of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines and was one of those who was instrumental in changing the composition of the board from mostly white male to multicultural, not by demonizing white males but through dialogue.

With Shawn, Victor, Rudolfo, and me, Before Columbus included members of the main colored ethnic groups. Still, though our administrator, Mary Taylor, was of European ancestry, no one else from this important element was included on the board of Before Columbus, a group that defined multiculturalism inclusively. (When Mary left the organization, Gundars Strads took over her duties, and he has managed the foundation since then.) In 1977, then, we invited an Irish American writer and publisher, Bob Callahan, to join.

A few of the colored nationalists in the distribution group objected to our decision to add European American ethnics. One could understand their concerns. Many whites are educated to believe that it is their mission to lead and civilize those whom the educational system, whether consciously or not, treats as their inferiors. The Omniscient Boomers, whom we are so familiar with in California, pretend to know more about the cultures of other ethnic groups than the members of those groups, yet they fail to identify with their own ethnicity. They classify themselves simply as "white."

And the Omniscient Boomer is only the latest incarnation of the type that in American history has done so much to divide members of different ethnic groups. Before Omniscient Boomers, there were the sixties Liberals who believed that their role in the civil rights movement was to lead. The abolitionists of the nineteenth century made the same error. They didn't permit the Black antislavery lecturers in their employment to express independent judgment, and when their employees balked, as Frederick Douglass did, they were dismissed as being ungrateful. Such patronizing attitudes on the part of whites