

Carme Manuel, ed. 2014. *Interrogating Voices: Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century American Women's Short Stories*. Valencia: JPMEditiones. 165 pp. ISBN: 978-84-15499-19-0.

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In *Interrogating Voices: Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century American Women's Short Stories* Carme Manuel has compiled eleven stories by American women writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds which span the period from before the Civil War to the early years of the twentieth century. The volume includes stories that have become classics in courses on American women's literature, like "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935); stories by once celebrated antebellum writers now lost in the sands of time, like Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880); unfamiliar stories by well-known writers, like Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888), and stories that will acquaint readers with less known or utterly unfamiliar names, like Grace King (1852-1939), Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935) and Sui Sin Far (1865-1914). The general aim of this anthology, as the editor explains, has been to offer a sampling of "engaging short stories" by women who "helped shape American short fiction and recreated in their texts their unflagging eagerness to participate in the political, economic, social, cultural and racial issues of their times" (7).

Carme Manuel's compilation appears in the context of an explosion of canon-formation studies that, for the last few decades, have constituted an essential component of the feminist challenge to traditional literary study. In that sense, *Interrogating Voices* engages with a still vital strain in feminist scholarship: the need to discover and recover women's voices, and to make a case for their aesthetic and cultural significance. The anthology cannot be defined as an archival endeavour, as most of the stories included have been brought back into print in modern collections, like Elaine Showalter's *Scribbling Women: Short Stories by 19th-Century American Women* (Showalter 1997) and *The Vintage Book of American Women Writers* (Showalter 2011), as well as in other contemporary editions of literary texts. But current compilations such as Showalter's are lengthy volumes that provide no underlying pattern or motif to sustain the editors' choices. Conversely, *Interrogating Voices*, which is printed in Spain by a small artisan press that specialises in Anglo-American literature, is a compact edition that focuses on women's literary engagement with issues which were pivotal

in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, in particular the articulation of racial and gender oppression. And because the volume is chronologically organised, the stories allow us to appreciate how some of these national concerns—particularly the black question—evolve and regionally ramify in the time-span covered in the anthology, from the monstrous face of slavery to other more nuanced—or not so nuanced—forms of ethnic oppression. Women writers took part in the discursive construction of an American national identity; they unpacked the myths of pre-Civil War Southern culture, confronted the continuing presence of Southern and Northern racism, put marginal characters (the lonely spinster, the servant, the grandmother, etc.) central stage, presented daring critiques of gendered structures of power, and with their aesthetically committed exploration of key national themes helped shape a rich and diverse literary tradition.

In order to elucidate how the writers selected fit on the timeline of American literature, the anthology is preceded by a scholarly introduction where the editor contextualises the stories, surveys critical interpretations, provides relevant information about authors and underscores their literary significance. There are some statements that, in my view, would have benefitted from a bit of fleshing out, such as the editor's claim that the "eleven stories included in *Interrogating Voices* partake of the wish to be vehicles of knowledge" (29). Is Carme Manuel using the term 'knowledge' in Rita Felski's sense? In her chapter "Knowledge" in *Uses of Literature* (2008) Felski defends the idea that literary works can be objects of knowledge as well as sources of knowledge and that literature may serve cognitive as well as aesthetic ends (Felski 2008, 7). The editor of this volume does not clarify what kind of knowledge the eleven stories convey. By selecting writers who "engaged actively in the reform of society" (29), however, she seems to have cast her lot with Felski's defence of a historically-attuned approach, one which strives "to do justice to the social meanings of artworks without slighting their aesthetic power" (Felski 2008, 9). Manuel never reduces her selection of texts to the bare bones of political or ideological function, nor does she consider them exclusively in terms of their aesthetic or literary otherness.

One of the attractions of this anthology is its thematic approach. Although this is not explicitly stated in the introduction, all the stories share an underlying standpoint: that of siding with the unheard and the wronged. The editor's choice seems to support those critics who have argued that the short story is especially well-suited to the expression of women's or marginal voices (see Patea 2012, 7-8). Most pertinent to this collection seems Clare Hanson's observation that "the short story has offered itself to loners, exiles, women, blacks—writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative'" (Hanson 1989, 2). Without exception, all the collected stories have as protagonists single, poor, old or eccentric women, blacks, mulattoes, emigrants or other characters who fall outside the ambit of the 'ruling narrative.'

Political issues are manifestly at the heart of this volume. As the introduction makes clear, in devising the anthology the editor has chosen texts uniting what Andrew J.

Furer in “From ‘Water Drops’ to General Strikes: Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Short Fiction and Social Change” (2010) judges to be “the two major eras of the short story” which coincide with “the two great upsurges of American reform impulses” (8). The abolition of slavery has to be considered the most significant national reform campaign, and the first two stories were published immediately before and after the Civil War, when the issue of race was taking central stage. The rest of the stories, as Manuel explains, “appeared at a time which saw the growth of labor reform, anti-imperialism, suffragism and women’s rights movements together with the fight against racism, segregation and immigration laws” (8). They ponder a variety of concerns, from segregation to immigration laws, from the Woman Question to the issues of women’s creativity, independence and domesticity.

The destructive consequences of slavery is a recurrent topic, but in this anthology racial and gender oppression always go hand in hand. In the story that opens the collection, “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes. A Faithful Sketch” (1843), Lydia Maria Child encroaches upon a theme that society, as she would put it in her Introduction to Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), considered “indelicate” (Child 1861, 8). It examines, in a language drenched in irony, the plight of slave women forced to have sexual relations with their masters, and the shattering effect it had on the lives of both black and white people. The story, which was based on newspaper articles and interviews with runaway slaves, is so audacious in its treatment of its central theme that the author chose not to include it in her compilation *Fact and Fiction*. American scholars have had to wait for more than 150 years to discover a text that, as Carolyn Karcher remarks in *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (1998), “ranks among the masterpieces of antislavery fiction” (9).

The devastating effect of slavery on family life is taken up again by Louisa May Alcott in “My Contraband; or, The Brothers” (1867), where Alcott presents a hero of mixed race struggling against his desire to murder his white half-brother who has raped and caused the death of the woman he loves. The story, which was inspired by Alcott’s own experiences as a nurse during the Civil War, challenges the standard view of Alcott as a genteel domestic writer and brings to the fore her political conviction that there could be no true national freedom without racial and gender equality.

The problematic of race in American literature inevitably entails the plight of the mixed-race figure, and four out of the eleven stories draw on the “tragic mulatto” tradition. As well as in Alcott’s narrative, it also features in later stories by Kate Chopin (1850-1904), Grace King and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. None of the mulattoes or (more aptly) mulattas survive or have a happy fate, a fact that seems to corroborate Sterling Brown’s observation in *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937) that the mulatto figure must “go down to a tragic end” (quoted in Raimon 2004, 4-5). This tragic outcome may suggest writers’ incapacity to imagine a place for their racially mixed characters in an emerging nation. Yet in the innovative work of some of these regional

writers, like Kate Chopin, the mulatto-centred stories interrogate, as Manuel aptly notes, the problematic nature of racial difference and the perversity of a racist culture of which these writers disapproved (9, 24).

Another overarching theme that gives shape to the volume is the plight of women, something which is particularly apparent in the stories written after 1870. Suppressed female creativity features in “Marcia” (1872) by Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910) and in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), both dealing with the (hopeless) struggles of women for self-assertion and self-expression in a repressive and intellectually impoverished environment. A more positive note is to be found in other stories by regional writers at the turn of the century. In “The Town Poor” (1896) Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) portrays not just the deprived lives of unmarried women in the declining rural communities of New England but also, as Manuel points out, the possibility of women’s sisterhood amidst appalling material conditions (17). The collection also includes “A New England Nun” (1891) by Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), a story which has appeared in a previous Spanish anthology in translation (Gómez and Usandizaga 2006).

The underlying thematic pattern of the underrated or the wronged re-emerges in the last two stories, which encompass issues of ethnic exclusion within the American melting-pot. “The Trial Path” (1901) by the Native-American writer Zitkala-Sa (1876-1938) opens a window onto a world overlooked by mainstream society, that of Plains Indian culture. This story, which involves an Indian trial and a conception of justice far removed from the Western tradition, is one of the rarities of this collection. It portrays an Indian grandmother telling anecdotes from the past to her granddaughter, who ends up falling asleep. In her effort to pass on the histories and traditions of her tribe, the Indian storyteller finds it hard to obtain a real hearing, which signals the lack of concern among the younger, non-indigenous Americans for the sacred knowledge of the older aboriginal culture. The collection closes with “In the Land of the Free” (1912) by Sui Sin Far. This narrative depicts a Chinese emigrant family battling with a corrupt legal administration and the cost of assimilation in ‘the land of the free.’ It seems rather fitting that the editor has chosen this tale, which ends in estrangement, to close her anthology, for all the ‘interrogating voices’ she has gathered coincide in their vibrant questioning of the myth of an ideal national family.

Women in the nineteenth century would not dare to advertise themselves in the manner in which Walt Whitman did. But neither did they remain silent or literarily disenfranchised. Encouraged by the development of the short story in America, women made use of this adaptable and flexible form (see Showalter 1997, xxxvi; Cox 2005, 131) to intervene in the public arena. It is thanks to studies and anthologies such as the one Carme Manuel has fashioned that we are able to appreciate the extent to which women constituted a vital part of their literary culture. The spin-off of a fertile career teaching, researching, discussing, editing and translating primarily—if not exclusively—American women authors, Manuel’s worthy endeavour once again seems

to have lent credence to the claim that, to guarantee the fullest justice to women's writing, women authors have needed "a critical jury of their peers to discuss their work, to explicate its symbols and meanings, and to demonstrate its continuing relevance to all readers" (Showalter 2010, xi).

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