

REVIEWS

Text Matters. A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture 1 (2011). Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2011.

Text Matters is a brand new, English-language journal which has just appeared on the Polish academic scene. It deserves notice from readers of *The Polish Journal for American Studies* not only because of the content of its first volume, but also as a serious publication with an impressive international advisory board—in other words, as yet another publishing opportunity for scholars working in the fields of American literature and culture. The first issue of *Text Matters* appeared in 2011, the second issue is on its way. The journal is an ambitious project conceived of in the Institute of English Studies at the University of Łódź and prepared in cooperation with the Department of Editing of the Polish Institute. According to the statement of intent written by the editor-in-chief, Dorota Filipczak,

the journal... seeks to engage in contemporary debates in the humanities by inviting contributors from literary and cultural studies intersecting with literary theory, gender studies, history, philosophy, and religion. The journal focuses on textual realities, but contributions related to art, music, film and media studies addressing the text are also invited. (front cover flap)

By outlining so widely and inclusively the range of potential contributions to the publication, the editors not only throw open its doors to scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, but also demonstrate their awareness of the undeniable fact that English and American Studies departments and programs in Poland (as elsewhere in the world) have within the last thirty years greatly expanded their range of interest and gone interdisciplinary, producing in effect the kind of scholarship that eludes traditional rigid classifications. Here is a journal, then, that welcomes contributions across disciplines as well as across geographical and cultural boundaries, from scholars working in English, Irish, Canadian, Australian and American studies, in history, even in theology.

To prevent a complete thematic miscellany of contributions, the editors of *Text Matters* organize each issue around a topic. In no. 1, 2011, this topic, “Women and Authori-

ty,” is explored by over a dozen contributors, including two philosophers and one theologian, in addition to literary scholars. This main section, almost surprisingly unified in focus, is followed by a section labeled more inclusively (if not all-inclusively) “Word/Image/Sound” and presenting articles on a wide variety of subjects, from the place of religion in contemporary art to dance as a tool of subversion. Closing the book-size volume (over 300 pages in all) come reviews and two interviews, one with the Australian aboriginal writer, Jared Thomas, the other with the English theologian, Alison Jasper, whose article also appears in the volume.

In the most general terms, the section on “women and authority” comprises commentaries on various relations between the two, exploring the culturally-sanctioned denial of authority to women, women’s submissive or rebellious attitudes to authority, women’s sense of their own authority and their efforts to assert it. The article by Pamela Sue Anderson, propitiously chosen to open the volume, sets the tone for the discussion by addressing the problem of women’s marginalization by the western philosophical tradition. She writes about the implications of Kant’s imagery in *Critique of Pure Reason* (“the island of understanding,” “the land of truth,” “the stormy sea of uncertainty”) upon women’s “negative education” (11) which has inhibited their ability to think critically and with confidence. Another text by Anderson, a book-length study entitled *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, informs the argument in Dorota Filipczak’s article devoted to the Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart, whose women protagonists, by venturing beyond the confines of the Kantian “island of understanding,” discover their power and thus assert their authority. In an admirably balanced and carefully phrased essay, Alison Jasper, in turn, takes issue with the generalizing habit of feminist criticism to view all women as victims of male normativity, to the unintended effect of de-emphasizing the accomplishments of those women who did find ways, courage and strength to be independent and original, even in the most untoward context of Christian theology and practice. Jasper’s example is Michèle Roberts, the English novelist, discussed as a singular theological and literary genius—in Julia Kristeva’s understanding of the concept—who has pursued a unique understanding of God on her own, non-androcentric terms. Interspersed with articles exploring several novelistic and poetic polemics with women-marginalizing cultures (Katarzyna Poloczec’s study of the Irish poet Mary Dorcey’s lesbian poetic manifesto; Małgorzata Myk’s article about Virginia Woolf’s Rhoda in *The Waves* as a character whose conflicting sense of selfhood makes her “an astute critic of gendered reality”; 106), one finds analyses of texts which explicitly deny women not only authority, but also agency and the ability to control their own lives. And so Agnieszka Łowczanin writes of the complete disempowerment of Laurence Sterne’s Mrs. Shandy, contrasting his novel’s experimental spirit with the “fossilized” (44) perception of wom-

en it endorses, while Joanna Kazik takes a look at some late medieval and early modern English texts in which humor becomes a means of exerting control over and dominating women.

Does anything like a cumulative message emerge from the thirteen articles collected in the “Women and Authority” section? Collectively they reiterate, articulating in fine detail, the by now well known fact that women have been denied authority by core philosophical, mythological and literary texts of western culture and that for generations some women at least have questioned, resisted and artistically sabotaged the androcentric order. Less predictably, the contributors to *Text Matters* more or less directly point out that the Herculean cultural project of the past two centuries of restoring dignity and authority to women remains light years away from successful completion. Despite the cooperative effort of feminist activists, philosophers and theologians, generations of women artists have learned that the androcentric culture yields its strongholds (including those in academia) only grudgingly and only to reclaim them at the first opportunity. This fact is expressed most poignantly in the article by Alex Ramon, who reflects on his personal experience of repeatedly coming under censure for being a male critic writing about a female writer, Carol Shields. Ramon exposes the persistence in the scholarly world of thinly-veiled prejudices and reports the denigration and patronization of scholars who transgress certain tacit understandings and hierarchies of value. He observes: “Writing about women’s writing seems to require justification for the male critic, but for the female critic writing about male authors it appears that fewer questions are asked” (173). This retrograde tendency in the academia to stick with (or revert to) gender- or race-based thinking (only women critics, we hear now and then, can do full justice to women’s fiction, only Native American scholars understand Native American texts) has its parallel, Ramon claims, in the anti-feminist backlash observable in the larger world of popular culture which seems to be re-embracing old ideas of gender segregation and gender identification. His diagnosis of the responsibilities this new cultural turn imposes on critics and theoreticians of culture could be read as a justification of the entire “Women and Authority” section in *Text Matters*. He writes: “I would concur, that, as popular discourse on identity categories grows increasingly divisive, we require both literary and theoretical texts that provide a counter-narrative, allowing male and female readers more room for movement between gender and other identity positions” (174).

In the “Word/Image/Sound” section two articles deserve special mention. One, by Paul Tiessen, is an intertextual reflection on some essential discrepancies between how the Canadian writer, Rudy Wiebe, has represented the same Mennonite environment of Depression-era Canada in two of his books, published nearly fifty years apart from one

another—his 1962 novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, and his 2006 memoir, *of this earth*. These discrepancies, sometimes astonishing, are highlighted by Tiessen not only to propose a re-reading of the writer's first novel, but also to reflect on the factors—historical, literary, and personal—which account for the change in his treatment of the subject. Another noteworthy contribution is Katarzyna Ojczyńska's "One Mad Hornpipe: Dance as a Tool of Subversion in Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*." This study of a blind female character who dances her protest against patriarchal control over her body and fate could just as well have been placed in the "Women and Authority" section. Yet the amount of space the author devotes to the roles and meanings of dance in Irish culture and history as well as the symbolism of dancing in the play explains the editorial choice to emphasize these other aspects of Ojczyńska's concerns.

For an Americanist, the first issue of *Text Matters* offers relatively little in terms of direct commentary on topics specifically American. There are two reviews, one by Agnieszka Salska, the other by Grzegorz Kość, of recent Polish publications on American literature. The only full length essay devoted to matters American is Małgorzata Poks's discussion involving Denise Levertov's nature poetry of "caressive sight", which, the author argues, allows us to view the poet as a "romantic modernist" (147), one who overcomes modernist spiritual skepticism to seek spiritual implications in natural beauty. For nearly all other contributors to the volume, the frame of reference is either British or Canadian. Even so, their reliance on and engagement with contemporary theory, especially feminist criticism, becomes a meeting ground on which those working in American studies cannot fail to spot parallel preoccupations, ideological continuities or counterpropositions, and nooks for potentially fruitful comparative exploration. Another such meeting ground is suggested by the interview with the Nukunu writer, Jared Thomas. Rich in information about the Aboriginal literary scene in Australia, the interview also illustrates the soundness of the fundamental assumptions of postcolonial studies—the commonality of colonial practices the world over and the similarity of fates suffered by the colonized, many of whom, including Australian Aborigines, do not even see themselves as living in a postcolonial era. Moreover, Thomas's remarks on the situation of contemporary Aboriginal writers and their responsibilities as spokespeople for their tribal groups bring out numerous correspondences between their predicament and the problems faced by ethnic, especially Native American, authors in the United States.

One last thing about *Text Matters* that by all means deserves mentioning is its graphic design. It is not only exceptionally elegant, but also clear and reader-friendly. The conspicuously set-off article titles and abstracts (the latter being longer and therefore more informative than the customary 500-word synopses), the pleasantly legible table of contents, the large page numbers, unconventionally placed, with an evident aesthetic intent,

on margins half way down the page—all of these taken together give this publication a distinct and attractive look, communicating on the visual level the journal editors' ambition to make a difference.

Joanna Durczak
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin

Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors, eds., *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges*. Special Issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 55.4 (2010). 232 pages.

African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges, a special issue of the journal of the German Association for American Studies, guest edited by Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors, offers a stimulating combination of literary texts and critical contributions by leading African American studies scholars from the United States and Germany. The temporal and thematic scope of the publication ranges from the Harlem Renaissance to contemporary performance poetry. The articles address many significant issues in the most recent African American studies debates, such as the transnational paradigm and "the end of African American literature."

The issue opens with five short stories by Zora Neale Hurston, reprinted for the first time since their appearance in black magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. This section is remarkably attractive to any Harlem Renaissance scholar not only because of the previous scarce availability of the material but also because the short stories challenge the most common classification of Hurston as a folk-inspired artist, whose texts represent black communities in the American South. The works published in *Amerikastudien/American Studies* are all set in the Northern urban context and mostly deal with the problem of the Great Migration and the dichotomies of rural/urban and private/public. They are preoccupied with the influence of migration on black gender relations, which is especially visible in multiple representations of naïve sugar daddies, mulatto gold-diggers, and rough Southern women. Most stories are written in an experimental style that combines the biblical verse, the folk vernacular, and the black urban idiom, which was later developed and perfected in Hurston's masterpiece, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. The text "Back Room" stands out from the other reprinted works and Hurston's output in general, since it represents the dilemmas of an urban, upper-class emancipated black woman and is written in standard English and traditional interior monologue. The stories are accompanied by useful introductions by Glenda R. Carpio, Werner Sollors, and M. Genevieve West, as well as by two previously unpublished Hurston